



## TO THE READER

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# The Final Image

*By the same Author*

BRITISH SOCIAL LIFE  
IN INDIA, 1608-1937

*Etc.*

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DENNIS KINCAID

# The Final Image

London

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. . . Death's long precision, while  
All things undo themselves  
From sunhood, living glory . . .

LAURA RIDING





# The Final Image

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## THE FINAL IMAGE

FACES came and went, hung for a moment in midheaven, and then vanished like wind-driven balloons. Soft fingers and rough bony fingers rubbed her cheeks, patted her arms, stroked her head. And then her mother's soft arms encircled her and she was at her bosom, insensible to all emotions save warmth and hunger. Her mother had a special smell, and her long blue-black hair had champak flowers in it, thin yellow buds, soft and velvety to the touch and leaving a golden pollen on your fingers. She wore bright saris of green and brown and gold, but her bodice was always dark blue with a little silver fringe along the top. There was a line of wheat-coloured flesh between the bodice and the skirt.

She lay on her back in a small white room. The cow-dunged floor was warm and soft. On one wall was a gaily-coloured print and on another the seven scarlet spots in honour of her mother. The green shutters were open and silvery leaves of a pipal-tree shimmered against the sky. Enormous butterflies came softly in from the sunlight and hovered over the room on heavy



metal-tinted wings. When the wind blew, clusters of gold-mohur blossom fell tumbling past the window. You heard the squawk and chortle of parrots fluttering about the eaves ; and sometimes a great green fellow would settle for a moment on the window-sill, preening himself, fluffing out his feathers and chuckling to himself. Little blossom-head parakeets would flutter round the pipal-tree ; and jade-green bee-eaters spun and whirred in the sun.

There was a clatter of jars in the courtyard. They were going to draw water from the well. The servants chattered to each other over their work, and the ropes and water-wheels creaked as the brimming jars jerked heavily up, clinking dully against the rough-hewn walls of the well.

The door opened noisily and her mother came in. She stirred on the floor, stretching out tiny fists. It was time for the midday meal. The other women of the household gathered in the little room, squatted round on wooden stools along the walls, gathered handfuls of rice from plates made of stitched banana leaves. After dinner the house fell very silent. Doors and windows were shut to keep out the hot, dry wind. Innumerable insects droned and murmured, lizards blinked drowsily upon the walls, motes of dust circled down thin shafts of sunlight that filtered under the barred shutters into the dark room.

At night she slept in a room at the back of the house with her mother. A pillow and a thread-

bare rug were bed and bedclothes combined. Sometimes it was very hot and the mosquitoes whined maddeningly and she could not sleep. So her mother would sit up and take her on her knee and tell her stories. She liked hearing about the Gods and Goddesses, whose pictures (cheap oleographs in garish colours) were nailed to the crumbling wall. Her mother would lift the lamp and out of the shadows started Shiva, ashen and lean, tiger-robed, enthroned in majesty upon the Himalaya, or elephant-headed Ganpati riding on a rat.

“Why has he got that funny head?”

“That’s a long story, my precious, and it’s late now.”

“Ah, tell me.”

“Well, just this once. But afterwards you must promise to go straight to sleep. Promise?”

“Yes, yes. . . .”

“Once upon a time Shiva’s wife, the goddess Parvati, was going to take a bath. Being very modest, as all Hindu ladies should be, she was afraid that a man might surprise her as she bathed, and she began to wish that she had someone to keep guard at the door of her room. She thought for a while and then an idea occurred to her. She ran her finger over her body and with the scurf that remained along the edge of her finger she made a little figure of a boy. She clapped her hands with pleasure for the manikin was very pretty and had an enchanting sidelong



smile. She told him to guard her door and, saluting, he ran out and took up his position, standing straight and stiff like a soldier. Unfortunately the God Shiva happened to pass that way, and seeing a strange lad standing at his wife's door he fell into a fit of rage. 'Who are you?' he roared, louder than the waters of Ganges bounding from the hills. The boy frowned and repeated Parvati's message, 'No one may enter here.' At that the God was unable to control his anger. He opened the terrible third eye that is hidden in the centre of his forehead and with a single glance burned off the head of the faithful little creature. But when Parvati saw what had happened she began to cry bitterly. She told her husband the whole story between her sobs. 'I loved him,' she wept, 'and now you have killed him.' Then Shiva promised he could restore her manikin to life. 'I shall put upon his shoulders,' he promised, 'the head of the first living creature that I see.' He went out of his wife's room and at the same moment his eyes fell on an elephant who was passing that way. With a neat snick of his sword he cut off the elephant's head and set it upon the shoulders of Parvati's manikin, who was instantly restored to life. Shiva became very attached to him; he was soon adopted as the son of the great God, and thus became a God himself. And, since the elephant is the wisest of the animals, so this new little God became the wisest of all the Gods.

He is the patron of learning and the lord of obstacles, and every little housewife prays to him whenever she is in difficulty or distress."

She listened round-eyed and absorbed, and it was always a sad moment when the story was over and her mother said, "There, that's all. Now turn over like a good child and go to sleep as you promised me."

But there was one picture in a corner of the room, of which their mother would never tell her any story. It was a painting of Kali, the Mother. She was shown as a hideous demon, blue-black in colour, naked to the waist, wearing a necklace of human skulls and trampling upon a pyramid of mutilated corpses. To add greater realism a tuft of real human hair had been gummed round the goddess' head and from her gaping froth-rimmed jaws hung a strip of scarlet cloth to represent her tongue.

"Who is that?"

"It's a picture of the Mother."

"Tell me about her."

"Some other time, darling," and the lamp would be quickly moved and held before a picture of Rama and Sita, the ideal lovers of Indian mythology, or of Shivaji the hero-king leading a Maratha charge.

\* \* \*

In winter the doors opened with a clatter and you came out into a world white with mist.



Spectral, like an octopus uncoiling through the milky shallows of a lagoon, a leafless champak-tree writhed above the low-roofed village temple in front of which two infinitely ancient columns carved with rude totem-faces gazed over the village square.

People came out muffled to the ears in their long white cloaks ; they walked stiffly, bent and shrivelled and slow. Fires cracked in courtyards and the smell of wood-smoke filled the still air ; spindles of blue smoke stood up straight against the sky. Presently, the young women passed down the village street to fetch water from the river, walking in single file, each having the water-pot on her head, or against her hip. They walked with the grace of hill-women. Unshod, each foot trod firm and confident, lay flat upon the earth as though part of it, drawing up strength and rest. Their rust-red or bee-green saris fell in folds of Tanagra grace. Above the rounded hips the waist was a band of polished bronze. Under tight little bodices the breasts were hard and full, unresponding to the slow movements of the arms. They passed on down the boulder-strewn street, stopping for a moment's obeisance at an old tree at whose base a few red stones marked the abode of some deity. No one quite knew what yapping godling lurked among the roots and mosses of the old tree, but it was a traditionally sacred place and you couldn't be too careful.

The children came tumbling out of the house, the youngsters naked and plump, rolling over and over in the dust. The older ones, peaked and solemn, sat gravely about and picking up splinters and pebbles and any treasure-trove that the rubbish-heap of the street afforded, played quiet archaic little games.

Then it was time for school. The old Pandit shuffled down the street in his red heelless slippers, a shabby umbrella (that he had never been seen to open) clasped in his clawlike hand, his peaked cap pushed back from his skull. He cackled a few tiresome old-man's jokes at the children and they followed him up to the village temple where school was held. The mist was clearing now and from the steps of the temple you could see the rolling sweep of that high downland country. The fields were yellow with the winter crops, nagli, chorasini, and til-seed. The line of the Ghats was a violet thundercloud along the horizon. They went on into the gloom of the temple. Benches were pulled out facing each other, leaving a passage for the Pandit to pass up and down. At the far end the low boxlike shrine was closed, the gilt trellis-work gate drawn across. Occasionally in the darkness beyond you caught a sudden glimmer as though the God stirred. The girls sat one side and the boys the other ; the Mhar <sup>1</sup> children had to sit outside the temple and listen to the lessons through the

<sup>1</sup> Untouchable.



open door. People said that the Pandit purposely spoke in a low voice so that the Mhar children shouldn't hear him. They picked up their paper-covered lesson books and read aloud in turn. The last lesson in the book was adorned with a fine drawing of Maharani Viktoria and a smaller portrait inset of the Padshah Shahinshah George.

At twelve school broke up and they ran home for the midday meal. Bhimi was already beginning to notice that her house was grander and bigger than most other houses in the villages. That was because her father was the Patil or headman, who was always chosen from the same family, the *patilki* family. She felt proud of that and of the gleaming rows of copper pots on the kitchen shelves and her mother's many bangles.

The men came home in the afternoon, for the mists set in early and the evenings were very cold. The doors were shut and the men gathered in one room and the women in another, clustering together for warmth.

It was very different in summer. The men sometimes didn't return till eight or nine at night. The fields had to be ploughed before the rains, and the bajri and cotton-seed sown. Bhimi was sometimes sent to take the men's midday meal, flat maize cakes wrapped in a red cloth and a brass jar of foaming milk. When they saw her coming the men left their plough and squatted

down under the shade of a great banyan tree. After eating they lay on their backs gazing up at the dark, metallic-rustling foliage and the long spidery roots that hung down in clusters, searching, fumbling over the earth for a place of entry. When the hot noon wind blew the crimson banyan berries pattered into the ground, and a couple of green parrots leaped screaming into the sky. Otherwise it was very still, the air brittle with tingling, rasping insect-stirrings. Swishing a drowsy tail the bullocks stood dreaming in the long red furrows of the fields, the teeth of their ploughs deep in the soft earth. The vast sweep of downland rose in a slow wave to the sky, all yellow and dull red in the sun.

“Ah, well.” They rose, stretching and yawning. “Back to work.” They took hold of the ploughs again and the meek little bullocks, cream pale with a bent brown hump, stumbled forward up the sloping field, the plough parting the earth and the green lizards flicking away to safety. Whips cracked and the men urged on their bullocks with low echoing cries, “Ah-ooo-ch-aay.”

Bhimi stood a while watching them. Those were her two brothers, Sazna and Gyancee. They were naked to the waist and the sun shone on their rippling muscles, the warm bronze of their firm flesh. How strong they looked, their faces shadowed under their turbans, their bodies bent over their ploughs, urging forward and up.





When they reached the crest of the hill they seemed tiny against the sky. Far above them a vulture circled, black and gold. Few of the villagers worked so hard as the menfolk of Bhimi's family, for all their position in the village ; they always ploughed and reaped themselves, never hiring the land out and living on the rent as so many people did nowadays ; and they were rewarded for their industry by the finest crops for miles around, acres of tall thick bajri, wheat and sugar-cane.

Bhimi walked to the crest of the line of downs, where the land, lifting slowly in great rounded waves, rose at last to a long ridge. When you came to the ridge you were surprised to find that instead of another trough of rolling downland the earth fell away steeply at your feet. It was the edge of the hill-country. Half a mile down was a belt of forest, dark teak-trees with their clusters of sad flowers, and far far away and below the almost unimaginable plains of the coast-country, soaking ricefields and clumps of palm. Bhimi had never left her village nor wanted to. She felt no curiosity about the world so far below her. Wisps of mist coiled about the forests, a sudden wind shook the dreary flambeaux of the teak-trees, a thin pencil of blue smoke rose from some wood-cutter's encampment. All she thought of was that you have to be careful not to wander in the forests down there, for people said there were many bears. You some-



times saw their tracks even in the yielding turf of the hill-country.

She turned and went back towards the village. The houses with their mud-plastered walls and low red-tiled roofs clustered together in a hollow. A single house, that of the village moneylender, had a third storey and was painted bright blue. In the fields round the village the cattle were at pasture. A shepherd-boy with a scarlet turban and long bamboo staff squatted under a cactus hedge playing softly on a flute. She always liked to walk some way in the shadow of the ridge and then drop down towards the village along a boulder-strewn rib that thrust out into the hollow. She hardly confessed to herself the reason for this choice, but the truth was that she hated passing the temple of the Mother-Goddess that stood beside the straight cart-road to the village. Ever since the first day she had seen it she had been terrified of that huge red-daubed image, many-limbed, each arm holding a weapon, the lips drawn back over murderous fangs, the tongue lolling out. Over it strained the amber flag that was sacred to the Goddess, the old banner of the Maratha armies. It was absurd, she knew. There were a few straw huts round the temple where the priests lived (ordinary cultivators like the rest of the village but receiving a contribution of crops from everyone for their service to the Goddess) and there were always people squatting round the steps of the shrine.



Often the Sowkar's<sup>1</sup> servant had a talk there with soda-water and nuts for sale. But she began to tremble as soon as she came near. She averted her head so as not to see that terrifying idol. And when alone she always chose the longer way from the village to her family's fields. She came briskly down the ridge. The fierce sting of noon had passed and its harsh light had mellowed. The yellow grass rustled in the breeze and the cloud-shadows chased each other, slanting over the round hills.

She passed a bare knoll crowned with a circle of white stones grouped above a longer scarlet stone. The stones were set there in honour of Vetāl, the Ghost-King. Beside the large red stone was a pair of sandals. At the beginning of each month the villagers placed a new pair of sandals there and took away the old. When it was dark and the village gate was shut the red stone came alive, slipped on the sandals and walked round and round the village. It was not surprising that by the end of the month the sandals were quite worn out.

On those warm summer nights the men generally gathered at the village temple and sang old songs or told stories or discussed village politics.

One night Bhimi was aware of a tension amongst the men gathered there. She had been passing with a jar of milk, and guessing from the whispers and nodding heads that something of

<sup>1</sup> Village moneylender.



interest was in the air she squatted down in the shadow of a house. They were discussing the old woman Sunderi who lived in a ramshackle hut in a corner of the village, away from the other houses. She was a witch, they were saying. There were many proofs of that. When she was asleep (and sometimes she slept like an animal coiled in the sun by the village wall) people had seen queer little green insects pouring in and out of her mouth. At night people had seen a squirrel as large as a cat run out of her house and away into the darkness. Of course, they did not mind her being a witch ; a witch was a useful thing to have in the village, she could make good magic for the crops and bring plentiful rain. But Sunderi had been giving trouble. One of her goats had wandered on to the field of one of the villagers. He had beaten the goat off and scolded the old woman. She said nothing but gave him a strange look. The next morning he was found dead, a thin line of green foam along his lips. Everyone knew what that meant. When a witch wants to kill someone she fashions a little image of moistened flour and worships it with incense and champak-blossoms. She places a lime-fruit before the image and pours water with molasses over the image, uttering dreadful spells. Presently the lime-fruit gets up and walks towards the house of the person the witch has a grudge against. The fruit has a horrible face of crumpled green, the features just distin-



guishable, like a rough sketch for a mask symbolising malevolence. As soon as the lime-fruit passes into the house of the man against whom the magic is directed he expires. The lime-fruit then shrinks back into a ball and rolls home.

The men sitting round the temple decided that this must have been the way the poor fellow who had crossed the witch must have died. The difficulty was, they all agreed, nodding portentously, that once a witch gets a taste for the black art she finds it very difficult not to repeat her experiments ; and though a red clay doll hung upside down over the door of one's house was held to be a protection against the invading lime-fruit, it was difficult to feel complete confidence. They all nodded again, and then looked oddly at each other. There was a long silence. At last one said, " We must ask the Patil."

Bhimi rose up from the shadow where she had been crouching and ran home. They were coming to see her father. She busied herself scouring some brass pots. Presently she heard men at the entrance of the house. They came in and were closeted behind closed doors with her father.

Next day the village was strangely quiet. Everyone seemed to go about on tiptoe, to speak in whispers. Towards evening Bhimi slipped out and crept back to the temple. The men were gathered there as usual. They were talking in



whispers but she heard occasional sentences, and as they repeated over and over again the same remarks she soon gathered the threads of the story. She learnt that they had risen before dawn and caught Sunderi in her house and tied her with ropes. They had then dragged her down towards the stream, meaning to perform the curious and unpleasant ceremony which bereaves a witch of her power. At first Sunderi had struggled furiously, whining and yelping like an animal ; then suddenly she had gone stiff and silent, had followed them with jerky wooden steps like a clockwork thing. When they reached the river she stood stiffly erect for a moment and then toppled over. In exasperation the man had seized her by the hair. Her head came off in his hand. Looking closer they found that her body was quite hollow ; down the channel of her gaping neck you could see an empty mould, filled with a few grey webs. So they had buried her there.

\* \* \*

Next morning on the way to school several girls asked her what had happened, what was the reason for the heavy oppression that for the last two or three days crowded over the village like a thundercloud, but she refused to tell them. She hugged the terrifying secret to her breast. She had hardly slept all night for thinking of that old woman Sunderi whom she had so often seen



poking about the dusty weed-grown outskirts of the village—and all the time she was empty, hollow, a dead tree. And would they see that squirrel as large as a cat slipping in and out of her house?

Now they had reached the temple and the girls who clustered round Bhimi pestering her to tell them (for they all thought the Patil's daughter would be bound to know) fell silent, went demurely to their places on the long wooden forms, and took out their slates and reading books. It was the third book they had reached now and they read out in turn definitions of an island, a gulf and a peninsula, none of which interesting features they were ever likely to see. Bhimi's attention began to wander. At first school had been great fun. You met all the other children of the village, and it was fun beating the others and scoring high marks to boast at home about. But now she had lost all interest. She no longer felt herself a schoolgirl. The other girls, nudging and whispering and giggling, bored her. She asked her mother if she couldn't leave. But her father was adamant. He thought it proper for the Patil to have his daughter at the school. Otherwise when some Government official inspected the village he would be asked why he was not setting a good example to the other villagers. As it was they complimented him; ah, Patil Saheb, I'm glad to see you're educating *your* little girl.



It was always the Mamlatdar, the revenue-collector, who visited the village, a plump little Brahman who came panting up the winding cart-track with two servants carrying his books. He mopped his yellow shaven head with a bright bandana and held up his *dhoti* between finger and thumb, disclosing a pair of gaudy European sock suspenders on fat hairless calves. He inspected the school and the register of births and deaths and then formally asked the villagers if there were any complaints. But of course no one admitted there were. You didn't want Government officials lingering about in your village poking their noses into your affairs. Lastly he would squat on the steps of the temple to collect the land revenue with the Patil on his right and the Talati on his left. This last was the village accountant, a sad little colourless man with a watery nose. He was a Karkhada Brahman and knew that the villagers disliked him. Karkhadas are always viewed with superstitious distaste. They are very fervent worshippers of the Mother-Goddess, but their ceremonies are curious. For their sacrifices they use poison, instead of the clean knife. In the old days when human sacrifices were offered to Kali they used to invite the victim to a ritual dinner and mix poison in his food and then watch while he, poor wretch, struggled to compose his nerves as he awaited the first onset of agony. . . . He knew that the villagers avoided him and that expectant



mothers considered it a frightful omen to pass him in the street. But he never seemed to want to leave the village. He lived with an old Brahman widow. He had first been her tenant and then became her lover. Bhimi used sometimes to wonder at the love of these two. He was a bunched little creature, badly shaved and rheumy eyed, and she was a thin shaven-headed widow-woman, with arms like sticks and protruding teeth, who pottered querulously about the village muffled in a long scarlet shawl. At one time there had been some indignation in the village at this open scandal. A crowd had gathered at the door and stones were thrown. He came out to beg the villagers to leave them in peace. He stood in the door, very sad and meek. Someone threw a stone which caught him on the cheek. Bhimi was standing on the outskirts of the crowd and she felt a sudden wave of overwhelming pity ; she wanted to do something dramatic, rush forward and shelter him from the crowd ; but at the same time the trickle of blood from his face was oddly exciting.

Afterwards the villagers left him alone. But no one spoke to them. Bhimi one evening saw them, at the window of the widow's house. They were quite still, their shoulders touching, those two pathetic old people, motionless and entranced in the dreaming evening.

She was awakened from her reverie by the rasping voice of the old Pandit asking her what



a promontory was. Hurriedly she glanced down the pages of her book.

“Without looking at the book,” the Pandit insisted. “Come, come, child. We’ve just had it a minute ago. You must attend properly. Next, next.”

It was lucky, she sighed, that her father was the Patil. The Pandit didn’t dare say too much to her. To other girls he made the most disagreeable sneering remarks. He didn’t approve of girls being educated at all and took care to justify his opinion whenever he caught one of the girls idling or dreaming.

The village carpenter’s girl answered the question about promontories. She would, Bhimi muttered disgustedly ; officious little beast, always bouncing about on the form, putting her hand up and bursting with eagerness to show off her knowledge. The reading was then resumed, the dreary voice of the Pandit chanting the trite phrases of the lesson book.

On the benches opposite were the boys ; long shaven heads, each with a little pigtail at the crown, bent over the shabby books. One of them raised his head and looked at Bhimi. She knew his name was Suka. He was a Maratha, just as she was ; but his family was very poor ; the father had no land of his own and earned his living as a herdsman. She had seen him looking at her before, and now shyly she returned his glance. He was handsome with large eyes.

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Suddenly he blushed and hid his face in his book. As they came out of school, the boys running noisily down the village street, he turned and looked at her again, his eyes full of longing and homage.

\* \* \*

Her two brothers, Sazna and Gyanu, had left school two years before. They were still only boys, fourteen and fifteen, but they were strong and well developed and their labour was needed in the fields. Now they considered themselves proper men and sat with their father in the courtyard of the Patil's house where the villagers brought their quarrels for compromise and where the village minstrels on summer evenings sang old lays of the war of independence against the Moguls and the heroic doings of the Maratha Kings.

Sometimes Bhimi crept up and squatted down by her father. If he was in a good temper he patted her shoulder and she snuggled gratefully up against him. Then some of the men might tease her, "Ugh, still unmarried, Bhimi? Well, well, your parents must be finding it hard to find a husband for you. . . ."

And she would put her thumb in her mouth and pout, "I'm quite young still. I don't want to be married yet."

"Don't want! Just listen to the modern girl. . . ."

Soon they would forget about her and return to village politics. Generally it was the insolent attitude of the Mhars that everyone seemed to be talking about nowadays. In the old days the Mhars were properly kept in order, but now you were always hearing of this or that Mhar who had told a Maratha that he was no better than himself, who had tried to draw water from the village well instead of from the special Mhar's well half a mile away, who had refused to do scavenging work. This last was the most serious charge, for after all that was the duty of the Untouchables, and it was in return for it that the village allotted them a share of the crops.

"Why, only last week," said someone, "I told the Mhar to remove the carcass of a buffalo from my field. He was walking with some other young Mhars and they just laughed in my face. Remove your own buffalo, they said."

"Wah!" cried the listeners incredulously.

"It's a fact. Ask Punza here who was with me at the time."

And then some Mhar women threw mud and cow-dung into the Maratha well. . . .

The Mhars lived in a sort of ghetto at one corner of the village, the Mharwada it was called. And one night, just as everyone in the Patil's courtyard was agreeing that this new insolence of the Mhars couldn't be tolerated any longer, came the news that the Mhars had beaten a Maratha. Bamboo *lathis* were seized and the



Marathas poured down the street. The wicket-gate of the Mharwada was closed and a screen of thorn-bushes piled over and in front of it. Behind it the Mhars chanted abusive couplets about the leading Marathas of the village.

Bhimi stood at the door of the Patil's house, watching the crowd at the far end of the village street, humming like angry bees round the gate of the Mharwada. Dust rose in clouds and bamboos were brandished wildly. They were tearing down the thorn-bush barricade. The Mhars had clustered on the roofs of their houses and were throwing tiles. A horrible scream told that some jagged tile had found its mark.

Suddenly Bhimi's mother caught her by the arm, dragged her back into the house and began to scold her.

"You silly child, what on earth were you standing out there for? Don't you realise there's going to be a serious riot, perhaps bloodshed! Supposing the Mhars broke out, what d'you think they'd do to a Maratha child, a young girl, and the daughter of the headman of the Marathas?" She began to describe in lucid terms the atrocities that victorious Mhars might be expected to commit. Bhimi was for a moment sobered, almost frightened, but then she thought that it was inconceivable the Mhars would win, there were so few of them compared with the Marathas. And even at that moment she heard a shout of triumph as the last thorn-bush was



torn aside and the crowd plunged into the Mharwada.

Her mother spread out her little carpet, and arranged the pillows.

“You must really go to sleep earlier, child. I don’t approve of this hanging about in the courtyard with the men. In my young days it would have been considered most immodest and queer. I must speak to your father about it. I’m afraid he spoils you terribly.”

She pursed her lips and clucked disapprovingly. The noise outside soon died away. It wasn’t much of a riot, Bhimi thought. The Mhars must have been knocked about a bit just to teach them a lesson. People were passing under the window, talking and laughing.

“That ought to sober the swine. They needed a good hammering to bring them to their senses.”

Bhimi lay on her side watching the stars winking in the amethystine sky. There was a finely-carved railing of blackwood over the lower half of the window, warriors with swords and gorgeous armour grimacing over the street. If you watched them very intently the warriors seemed to stir, to turn, to crane their necks and peer at you in the dark room. The village had fallen silent. Somewhere an owl hooted. Bhimi shuddered superstitiously, for owls are most ominous. If they perch on the roof of your house it portends a death. If you throw anything at them they catch your missile and fly away with it to a



lonely pool and there drop it, and as it sinks so does your body shrivel and dwindle.

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There were various places that Bhimi's mother impressed on her as essential to avoid ; any dark lane, for instance, where a *chudel* might lurk (this was a ghost whose back was that of a young and lovely girl—you would see her standing by the roadside sobbing quietly to herself and when you went up to offer help and sympathy the thing turned, revealing that its front was that of a fleshless skeleton)—or the Mhar's burial-ground where vampires collected at night. But worse than all these places was the village liquor-shop. The men got raving drunk there and on coming out might assault a lonely girl who happened to be passing. A curious little place it was, white-washed and square with a notice-board hanging beside the door announcing a Government licence to sell "country liquor". On their way back from the fields most of the men turned in for a drink. Some tossed off a glass of harsh aromatic liquor and then with a word of greeting to their friends trudged on home. Others settled themselves there for the evening, squatting along the walls, or with feet folded under them on the long wooden bench. The proprietor of the shop was the village Sowkar, Shripat ; a stocky little figure with a red cap worn aslant and cunning little eyes and a cluster of pearls at each ear ;



he always wore a grey serge European waistcoat with a large Ingersoll in one pocket secured to a buttonhole with a leather strap ; though he was immensely rich his *dhoti* was always the dirtiest in the village, and very carelessly tied. He would slip in and lean against the counter watching his assistant ladle out the liquor, his wrinkled yellow face set in a grin of false geniality. His appearance for a moment cast a chill over the company. Everyone present was his debtor, had mortgaged his fields to him. Without his loans no villager would have been able to start his annual cultivation and meet the various expenses thereof, the hire of cattle and purchase of seed. Fulsomely he welcomed you to his shop (the one shop in the village where you could buy almost anything) and professed himself only too grateful to be able to serve you. The papers were ready in a moment—just your thumb-mark here, please—and then you stumbled out into the sunshine, a little bewildered but with a wad of notes in your pocket. And often you couldn't pay for your drink. But of course he would allow you credit, and credit at his shop for cigarettes and panleaf for chewing—and at the end of a few months there was another document you had to affix your thumb-mark to.

So for a moment when he came into the liquor-shop there was an uneasy silence. People were never quite sure that he might not suddenly say that no more credit was to be allowed to so and



so, or an announcement that several mortgages were falling due. He never did make any such announcements ; that was not his way ; he liked to buttonhole his debtor on his way back from the fields and lead him, still exchanging village gossip, gently into his shop and then slip in the murmured comment that the mortgage was now overdue. Could it be met now ? Oh no, he didn't in the least want to harass his esteemed client. Just this other little document for thumb-impression. A sale-deed of his client's lands, yes of course that was the formal wording of it, but how could anyone imagine that he intended to enforce such a sale ? That would be too cruel. No, my friend, any day you bring back the principal plus interest up to date I'll cancel the sale-deed. And meanwhile, just as a matter of formality, would you just sign these two other documents ? Yes, one's a transfer of possession and the other's a rent-note. And the beauty of that is that you'll be able to go on cultivating the land, and all you have to do is to pay me a portion of the crop, say a third, which we call rent in this document but which we know will really be interest on the original loan. That's very simple and convenient for everyone, isn't it ? . . .

No, he would never use any other method of dealing with his clients, always so gentle and persuasive. And, though for a moment his appearance sobered the company at the liquor-



shop, they soon forgot about him (he stood there so quietly by the counter, blinking his pale expressionless eyes, while his face retained unchanged that mark of geniality) and were in a moment deep in their endless conversation.

For some days past the invariable topic of discussion had been the trouncing of the Mhars. The cowardly wretches had actually sent telegrams to the authorities, talking of a communal riot and "many murders"; and the Sub-Inspector of Police had descended on the village to make enquiries. Luckily he was an old-fashioned Maratha, stout and blear-eyed and asthmatic, very indignant at having to come so far on what was sure to be a trivial errand (but his superiors got so excited nowadays at any wire with a mention of communal trouble).

"These Untouchables"—he puffed as he seated himself under the pipal-tree by the temple—"sending telegrams. Whoever heard of such a thing? In my young days no Mhar would have known how to send one, or what a telegram is."

He leant back against the tree-trunk, gazing up at the dome of leaves. It was a vast tree, very old, and revered as a God. The priest performed upon it the various ceremonies proper to a Brahman ascetic, painting caste-marks on it and girdling it with the sacred thread. And under its shade all enquiries were held and local disputes settled.



The Sub-Inspector pushed back his turban and mopped his forehead, grunting.

“Very well, let’s hear these Mhars,” and two Mhar spokesmen began a long tale of grievances, mostly absurd and obviously false.

“Aw, have you no shame?” the Marathas cried.

“As God is our witness”—the Mhars stretched out their skinny arms—“we are speaking the truth. The Marathas tied us up all night and caused us to be bitten without respite by snakes and other poisonous reptiles.”

“Wah! Oh, wah!” the Marathas’ voices were half-reproachful and half-amazed at such mendacity.

The wailing lament of the Mhars went on and on. They were obviously enjoying themselves. Every word had been thought out beforehand, and even though they described incidents that had never occurred they began to weep, overcome by the pathos of their recitals.

Presently the Sub-Inspector said he was tired and hungry. He rose to his feet, and the crowd that had gathered round the pipal-tree made way for him. Bhimi, whom he passed quite close to as he ambled down the street, was sadly disappointed as she looked up at his puffy little face. She had heard people speak with such awe and fear of the police that she had expected some giant, terrible figure (like one of those skin-clad demigods who in the crude frescoes on the temple



walls loosed blue-feathered arrows at hordes of demons), and it was a sad disillusion to see this tubby middle-aged fellow with a walrus moustache and the colourless watery eyes of an opium-addict. She watched him go up the steps of the Sowkar's house. Such a fine house, she thought, all blue with the owner's name painted in scarlet over the door, "Shripat"—she spelt out the letters—"Shripat son of Manigram." And then above, between the two windows of the upper storey (that had been a startling innovation in the village ; more rooms upstairs ? Wah !), a crude painting of a tiger crouching in yellow undergrowth and two men behind a cannon preparing to shoot. That had been drawn, Bhimi remembered her mother telling her, by one of the men who enlisted in the War and went away across the black water. When he came back he had amused himself for a while telling the village about his adventures and drawing pictures of ocean steamers and cannons ; but that had soon passed, and he had left to seek service on the railways. It was certainly one of his best efforts, that painting on Shripat's house, and Bhimi had often stopped to stare at it and wonder if the tiger would spring before the cannon shot.

When the Sub-Inspector was safely inside, the villagers clustered in a semi-circle round the house and began arguing endlessly. Bhimi wondered what sumptuous repast Shripat must have prepared for the Sub-Inspector. All officials, as



she knew, when they visited the village were entertained to dinner by the Sowkar. He had European chairs and plates and silver pots. . . .

It was an occasion that Shripat delighted in. A chair was pulled up for the Sub-Inspector, dusted and blown upon by one of the servants, and a frayed cushion set for his head.

“ Ah ! ” The great man sank back gratefully, kicking off his shoes.

“ A little—ahem—a little drink, Fauzdar Saheb ? ”

“ Drink ? Well, really, why you should ask me I can’t imagine. Always been a strict Hindu. But since you press me, and to decline hospitality is the worst of crimes, and it has been a hot climb up to this god-forsaken village . . . ” He broke off with several winks, and the Sowkar, grinning and winking back, and looking over his shoulder like a conspirator, said archly, “ I have the very thing, which I have been keeping especially for the Sarkar’s pleasure.” And going to a cupboard he drew his sacred thread out from under his shirt, ran his crooked fingers along it till he found his keys, and unlocked the cupboard.

The Sub-Inspector feigned disinterest in the proceedings, the servile pantomime that one expected of a snivelling moneylender, till the cupboard door cracked open, and then cocking his eye in that direction he smacked his lips, for there on the shelf was a bottle of whisky, indubitable European whisky.



The Sowkar brought it forward, lovingly clasped in both arms.

“This will please the Sarkar?”

“Oh yes, it will do very well.”

“Ah, I am greatly rewarded.”

“You didn’t get that in this bloody little village?”

“Oh no, not in this hole.” The Sowkar ranged himself with the Sub-Inspector, two men of the world exiled among rustics. “But owing to your honour’s favour, I can afford to have little luxuries brought up from Tryambuc City. It’s only thirty miles away and I send a servant there occasionally to fetch me the little comforts without which we would die in this awful little place.”

“Ah well”—the Sub-Inspector smacked his lips—“it’s good whisky you have got.”

“Yes, I’ve a friend of mine, a Parsee who keeps the English wine store there in Tryambuc City. I am indeed grateful to your honour’s approval. I have no opportunities of judging. I don’t drink myself.”

“Oh, go on”—the Sub-Inspector was becoming genial—“have a try.” He dug the Sowkar in the ribs with the knob of his cane. Shripat giggled coyly, delighted at his guest’s expansive humour.

A servant brought in a tray of appetisers, potato-bajas, egg-puffs, and brinjals in melted butter.

“ Well, this was a bloody silly show. Fancy my being sent all the way up here to enquire into a scuffle between some Marathas and Mhars. And what annoys me is the Mhars having the impertinence to send wires to the District Superintendent. As if he cares what happens to a lot of rascally Untouchables. But nowadays one has to pretend one is very zealous, one has to trot about the District from end to end, at the beck and call of any ruffian. Now what’s your version of the trouble ? ”

“ Of course, I am only a poor defenceless fellow as the Sarkar knows. As soon as trouble starts I lock my doors and windows. But as your honour has well observed it was really a trivial matter. The Sarkar has deigned to take notice of it, so everyone is making a great bom-bom and casting discredit on the other side. Of course there are a few rascals in the village ”—he named one or two people who had given him trouble about repayment—“ but the others are good poor people.”

“ I see.” The Sub-Inspector wrote down in his notebook the names the Sowkar had mentioned. They were Maratha names. Later in the afternoon he went and took tea with the Patil, who gave him the names of the Mhars he considered responsible for the disturbance. They were men who had been giving trouble about paying their dues to the Patil.

“ It takes two sides to make a quarrel,” the



Sub-Inspector said ponderously. "The Mhars must have given some provocation or there would have been no disturbance. On the other hand the Marathas most improperly took the law into their own hands. Well, I think we have the names of the guilty persons on both sides." He tapped his notebook and puffed out his stomach, really convinced that the village would regard his enquiry as a model enquiry. He called the two constables who had accompanied him and ordered the half-dozen villagers whose names he had recorded to be arrested. . . .

In the liquor-shop they were still laughing at the woebegone expressions on the faces of those who suddenly found themselves handcuffed and marched off. Shripat had taken care to inform all his other clients that he had personally pleaded for them with the Sub-Inspector, who had been very anxious to arrest them and had only yielded at long last to the Sowkar's prayers. They felt grateful to Shripat. After all if he did chivvy you rather over money matters, he did do you a good turn every now and then. They felt more cordial to the shrivelled old thing. Someone even ventured to offer him a drink, but he shook his head, the mirthless smile as ever puckering up his face into a thousand wrinkles. They began asking him about the fall in prices.

"Only two years ago we were getting fine money for our crop. Now we get half that. Why is that? "



He shrugged his shoulders. "It is so everywhere. Two years ago the war was just over, and the war-time prices ruled. When there was fighting people seemed willing to pay high for their food ; but now no one will buy except cheaply. I do not understand this. Only God does."

Their faces set into the momentary frigidity with which any particularly obvious truism was greeted. "Ah, only God knows. He knows everything."

"I tell you, my friends, I have suffered very heavy losses. I am rich no longer."

They looked incredulous, some began wondering if this was preliminary to some reference to loans overdue. But Shripat never mentioned his clients' liabilities in public, only when they were alone with him in the dark little room at the back of his house, the narrow room with matting on the floor and a few yellow cushions along the wall to recline against and a little silver image of the elephant-god in a niche beside the door.

Bhimi's father started at that queer remark of Shripat's about his being no longer rich. He had meant to go and ask for another loan. He had to have it. It could be beastly if the Sowkar began making difficulties. Of course, he hadn't been paying his interest. Who could with prices falling and wheat, his wheat, the best wheat for miles round, bringing in so little?



His friends noticed his sudden despondency and began to rally him.

“Indigestion, Shankar, or trouble with your wife?”

He shook his head. “Give me another drink,” he told the man behind the counter.

“Perhaps another witch in the village putting spells on people.”

It was said as a joke, but several people looked round sharply and cried, “Not that, don’t speak of that.”

“Perhaps a younger witch this time,” a young man by the wall said softly.

Shankar spun round. “Who said that?”

There was a moment’s silence, everyone staring at Shankar. Why should he get so angry at that young fool’s stupid joke, unless of course . . .

“It doesn’t matter. It’s nothing.” Shankar sank back on to the bench and drew his feet up under him. “I’m not well. It’s very hot.”

Everyone agreed. Such stifling weather was unusual in the high wolds. But clouds had been banking up all day and there was no wind stirring. Sitting in the narrow little shop they felt the sweat start up on their foreheads. In the light of the single lamp, round which a cloud of insects spun and murmured, the faces along the wall shone like polished masks. It was the end of May and the monsoon was due.

Presently Shankar mumbled some excuses and left. The village was very still, not a sound, not



a light. In the street sudden whorls of dust started up, spun round with a dry rustling of dead leaves and then sank back. Overhead the clouds hung low and palpable.

. . . That young fool in the liquor-shop, what does he know? Have people seen, are they talking about me? . . . Shankar kicked the cobbles savagely with his loose red shoes. He had prided himself on his secrecy and care. Who had been watching him, playing the spy? . . . Oh well, I don't care, let everyone know, and let them speak against me if they dare. He stopped and stared round the empty street, chest expanded and fists clenched.

And then he came to the little shack near the eastern gate. She answered his gentle knock as usual and drew him into the warm darkness. He clutched her to him with an old man's generous and jealous passion. He held her face between his two hands, her neck bent back as though for the knife, and gazed at her in the dim light. Ah, she was lovely, all firm and white and young, gazing back at him under half-lowered lids. But she knew it, she knew she had conquered him. He gritted his teeth. Bitch, like all of them. It was a great honour to be loved by the Patil, she a lonely young widow. And she'd got things out of him, oh, valuable ornaments and hard cash—she was starving, she kept telling him, and he couldn't bear to think of her firm young body wasting—and so he had to go



to Shripat for a new loan and people in the village were laughing and talking. For a second he almost hated her, and then she opened her eyes wide and smiled trustfully like a child, smiled up into his face. His hands relaxed and she nestled up against him and he smelt the champak-petals in her hair.

Bhimi lay longing for the rain. Everyone said the storm would come before morning. It had been a tense hushed day and she had watched the long-ridged clouds climbing the sky ; and rearing over all a huge thundercloud like the distended hood of a cobra, bronze-green above, fading downwards to the belly's earthy pallor ; she could almost see the small eyes, lidless and opaque, glisten like liquid onyx on the thin and copper-netted head. And over the rolling uplands the purple shadows unrolled, blotting out the sheen of the long grasses and of the smooth turf. Coming back from taking the menfolk their midday meal she had felt very small and fearful, under the lowering sky.

It would come, the rain, it would come ; but, oh, that it might come quickly. Everything was so still, the night airless and dead. Not a sound in the road, just a faint shuffle of some late comer . . . someone old and hesitant it seemed from the step . . . the noise stopped outside the house. There was a dull thud at the door. Silence. Then a sudden thick shouting and blows on the door. With a thrill of disquiet Bhimi recognised



her father's voice. Now they unbolted the door, the latch rattled and the door clattered open. Then her father's voice rose again, shouting, cursing. She heard bare feet patter past her door—that's Mother, she guessed. But her father's voice rose higher and higher. He was screaming like a woman—ah, but it was a woman screaming. She gave a little gasp and ran out and down into the courtyard. A servant held a hand-lamp. Reeling and stumbling, her father was shaking his fists, stamping, throwing back his head, and then lowering it like a bull about to charge, and all the time shouting. . . . "You needn't look at me like that, you old fool. You're old and scraggy now, don't you know that? Haven't you ever looked at yourself in a mirror? And hardly a word for your man when he comes in tired from the fields. And then you dare to mention the liquor-shop to me. To me! The Patil of the village! By God, woman, you need a good thrashing, you do. Ah well, you're not the only woman in this village. If you can't take the trouble to please your man there are others who will, others younger . . ."

Bhimi's mother stood opposite him, very stiff and still, a red flush on her cheek, the mark of a blow. Suddenly Shankar toppled over and lay sprawling. Bhimi's mother ran to him, told the servant to bring water, mopped his forehead, patted his hands. It was strange to see him lying helpless there, Bhimi thought. Her father.



He meant little to her, she realised with a start, almost nothing. Something hieratic, a figure of authority, her father, the Patil of the village. But now he was an old man lying on his back, his mouth open and spittle on his beard and the shadows from the small lamp making deeper the hollows of his face. And he had spoken like that to her mother.

Her sleep was troubled and she was at last awakened just before dawn by a peal of thunder. The air was full of movement, a great wind rushing over the roofs, tearing at the trees ; and then mingling with the wind-noise a stealthy whisper of rain, rising with a sound of waves till hard rods were drumming on the tiles.

Bhimi jumped up from her sleeping-mat and ran to the window. The gutters were full, the water gurgling deliciously. The air was sweet with the smell of wet earth and wet leaves. She thrust out her hands and bathed her face with rain water.

All day the downpour continued. The roads were ankle-deep in water. When they ventured out of doors the villagers hid themselves under hoods of plaited rushes that looked like squat canoes.

And all the morning Bhimi's mother sat at the window of her room upstairs, watching the driving rain and the clouds—so low they seemed but a few feet above the roof-tops—you saw them sweep over the ridges of the wold, coiling and



writhing, envelop trees and granite boulders and dissolve in a thick mist through which the rain streamed relentlessly.

. . . In front of my girl, my Bhimi . . . Perhaps all the village knows and laughs at me. She thought herself very fine, the wife of the Patil. But what of that now? The Patil has made another choice, and she is left alone of an evening now. And they will laugh, will laugh . . .

Bhimi ran in. "Can I help you with the dinner, Mother?" She stopped suddenly. Her mother's face was so still and white and drawn, like an idol cut in ivory. Then she turned towards her and passed her hand over her forehead, blinking a little, and broke into a wry smile.

"Yes, it must be late now. I'll come down at once. I hope the rain hasn't got into the kitchen." She talked hurriedly as she pattered downstairs, a rapid breathless murmur. No, the kitchen was dry as a bone. On the tiles overhead the rain rattled like a kettledrum and on the window-bars the pearly raindrops gathered, bulged and ran helter-skelter to the sill. But the cow-dunged floor was dry under their bare feet. "I expect the firewood will smoke dreadfully. It's bound to be moist." She struck a match and the sticks between the three great stones, that were her oven, flared merrily. "Lucky that, I made sure it would take years to get a good fire going. Hand me that flat dish, child." Bhimi



did as she was told and her mother began to make chapattis. Bhimi took a brass jar and went to milk the cows that stood tethered in a corner of the courtyard under a roof of corrugated iron. The rain was almost deafening on the iron sheets, and flies driven indoors in search of shelter buzzed about her face in swarms. She laid her head against the smooth yellow flank of Laxmi, her favourite cow, and took the smooth teats in her fingers.

. . . Mother is afraid I may mention last night. I'd like to tell her how I feel for her but I know she'd be furious if I said anything. . . . She brushed away the flies from her face, and fell to envying Laxmi's tail that swished round on alternate sides rounding off the flies, the clinging sleepy flies. Milk spurted into the jar, and rose in beady froth. She got up and patted Laxmi and ran down the courtyard colonnade to the kitchen, balancing carefully the brimming jar and losing never a drop.

"Clever girl," her mother said briskly, without turning her head. She was squatting by her stove. The chapattis were nearly ready, brown bubbles rose like scales on the oily surface. She sprinkled a pinch of salt over them and lifted the dish with a corner of her sari wrapped round her hand.

"Now some savouries."

Presently Bhimi's brothers came to the door of the kitchen and asked when dinner would be

ready. They were bored at having been indoors all morning, lounging about in the courtyard shelters, kicking their heels and rolling cigarettes.

“Ready soon? That’s a mercy. God, this rain.” Sazna pushed back his turban on his head, and looked back against the kitchen door-post.

“Where’s father this morning?”

“Dunno. He was pretty noisy last night.”

“Ah? Curious that, as he left the liquor-shop early enough.”

Bhimi saw her mother stiffen and felt a sudden rage against those loutish colts in the doorway. She ran to her mother’s side and took the half-cucumber she was cutting into thin slices and began to cut it for her; then she mixed the slices with salted curds sprinkled with maize-grains. Her mother sat back on her heels, watching her. Then she sighed suddenly and got up. It was no good; she must work; the moment she stopped she began to remember. . . . But it was nice of Bhimi to want so obviously to help her. She gave the girl a sudden little pat as she passed and Bhimi turned and smiled up into her face.

The rain fell incessantly, day after day, night after night, the endless, untiring downpour of the first quarter of the monsoon. The first break



in the rain did not come for perhaps three weeks, and then the villagers, gazing out of their windows, saw a streak of blue between yawning canyons of cloud. A fresh drying wind blew down the street, rippling the pools and shaking sudden showers from the pipal-leaves. People came out and stood at the doors of their houses, blinking up at the sky.

Like the other men, Sazna and Gyanu shouldered baskets and made for their fields, striding down the street and out into the open country, rejoicing in their limbs. The paddy had to be transplanted. Ankle-deep in brown swirling water, they bent over the young paddy shoots and drew them up from the soaking soil, the stems a vivid green and the roots like pale earth-worms.

Bhimi left the house towards midday with a parcel of chapattis and curry for her brothers. It was funny to be only taking meals for two. But her father had stayed at home. He looked ghastly these days. He was drinking heavily and returning home long after midnight, a wicker shelter his only protection from the rain.

She gave her brothers their lunch and then turned back. The clouds were banking up again, rising slowly from the sea.

The stream beside the village that in summer was a tiny rivulet, clinking between dry pebbles, had swollen now to an angry torrent, and instead of hopping casually across as she usually did,



she had to walk upstream some distance to the stepping-stones connecting the main road. Some villagers were fishing with triangular wood-rimmed nets which, as they bent squatting from the banks, they dipped into the rushing water and were occasionally rewarded by a glint of silver in the meshes. Along the banks bushes and shrubs were glorious in new green, and on their branches bulbuls hopped and sang.

She had forgotten that by the main-road one passed the old temple of the Mother-Goddess, and it was with a sudden shock that she found herself beside it. It was a white boxlike shrine, the dome flowering at the apex into a stylish lotus. On the single step were flowers rotting and broken coconuts offered by devotees. A wide doorway opened on the shrine and the idol of the goddess rose against the whitewashed wall. Ah, it was appalling, the demoniac cruelty and lust of that contorted face, the bared fangs and the lolling tongue ; and over her crown the whirling aureole of a dozen arms flourishing bloody weapons ; the necklace of skulls upon her breast and the shuddering bodies under her feet. Bhimi wondered how people dared go up to the very doorway of the shrine, break their coconuts and scatter rose-petals—the idol seemed alive, the bloodshot eyes followed you wherever you went. And stiff in the hard wind flew the amber flag of the Mother over the flat dome of her shrine.



She stood for a moment wrapt in horror and fear, trembling. Then she heard a voice behind her. It was a young man ; why, the boy she used to exchange glances with in school—what was his name ? Yes, Suka of course. He smiled shyly and apologised for speaking to her. She looked over her shoulder, for she was afraid of being seen talking to a youth not of her family. There was no one in sight. The stream played wildly down the curve of the downland and the wind-bent bushes were a screen between the village and the place where they stood. Suka had a few wild roses in his hand and he gave them to her. She thrust one in her hair, looking at him under lowered eyelashes. She had forgotten he was so handsome, his large slant eyes were yellow like a cat's, that a tuft of curly hair hung like that over his high forehead. Her heart was beating fast, so absurdly fast that she reasoned with herself, arguing that this was but a chance meeting, he had been courteous enough to give her a handful of roses, and now she would go on her way. But she did not move. He leaned upon a heavy bamboo, gazing at her. He was a goatherd like his father, as Bhimi knew ; and the goats wandered round him happily munching the lush rain-sweet grass, or reaching up to nibble the fresh delicious leaves.

“ I watched you standing here,” he said at last.

“ Oh yes ? ” She tried not to gabble breath-



lessly. "I—I didn't know anyone was near—I just—er—happened to stop a moment."

"Do you often come to this shrine?"

"I? Oh, never. I—I'm frightened of it."

"Frightened, are you? I hate it."

"Don't say that." She looked back as though afraid the Goddess would overhear.

"Why not?" His lean face softened with a mischievous smile. "The old lady won't hear us."

She implored him to be careful.

"Aw, don't be silly. Who's been stuffing your head with that nonsense?" He bent down and, picking up a pebble, tossed it into the shrine.

"Oh!" She raised her hands to her face. Even Suka for a moment seemed stunned by his own audacity and stood silent, his mouth pursed sullenly, the tuft of rebellious hair over his eyes. Behind them the stream rushed noisily; a sudden wind sent the branches rustling overhead; a hawk swooped and recovered and was swept away on the wave-edge of the wind.

She looked at him, awed and yet angry. "Why ever did you do that?"

"Why does one do anything? Aw, I'm sick of these Gods and Goddesses and the old Pandit and the Patil (yes, I know he's your father—I'm sorry but that's how I feel)—I'm sick of the whole village. I want to go away and live like a man down in the cities, not like a tethered goat up here, doing what I'm told, talking about the



same things with the same fellows day after day.”

“ Sick of—don’t you believe in the Gods? Aren’t you frightened to say a thing like that? ”

“ It’s not a question of being frightened—I just don’t care. Gods and Goddesses haven’t done me any good. My father’s a herdsman and his father was before him and it looks as if I and my children, if I have any, will be the same. That’s a fine prospect for a man isn’t it?—D’you remember those fellows who came back from the war? I was only a kid then but I used to listen to their tales and I couldn’t sleep at night for excitement. All those wonderful places somewhere away down there and I likely to be stuck here for ever.”

“ But not believe in the Gods? . . . ” she whispered. Such a thing had never occurred to her. The Gods meant nothing actual to her, but that they existed had seemed as unquestionable as that men did. They were all around you, the Village-God glimmering in the central temple, the prancing Monkey-God at the gate of the village, the Mother-Goddess fearful and omnipresent, dispenser of pestilence and death—why a few months ago there had been a small-pox epidemic and they had made an image of the Goddess, Shitala Mata, Small-pox Mother, and had carried it in procession down the village; an image made of cow-dung with two cotton-seeds for eyes and a nose and mouth rudely cut



out, a queer and oddly significant face. Then there was Dassara Day when you painted the horses' tails yellow and the cows' horns purple in honour of Rama's march to Ceylon, and the leaves of the shami-tree turned into gold coins as you plucked them, and a little clay image of the Goddess was set up beside each door. And then came the Feast of Lamps when every window was bright with red lights and lamps gleamed in the temple all night long and people walked about the streets in bright new clothes. The pageant of the Hindu year, innumerable festivals, the daily ritual of prayer, purifications and days of abstinence, the ceremonial fast every tenth day, every item of food governed by tabus and sanctities—it had been all part of her life, as inevitable and as unquestioningly accepted as the rising of the sun and the falling of rain.

“Perhaps I oughtn't to have said that to you.”

“No. I'm glad you did,” she said a little breathlessly. It was a secret between them, a link.

“Well, you'd feel like I do if you were a man. It's all right for you, I suppose. Your father's rich and he'll see you get a fine husband. You've nothing much to worry about.”

She felt a sudden distaste for the thought of marriage. It could never be with Suka.

“When you'll go away—down to the cities?”

He laughed harshly. “When a man can live without money. Who d'you imagine I am? I



just get enough to starve. I don't know a girl anywhere else. What use would I be? Aeh, it's no good thinking of it."

He turned suddenly and began calling his goats. She stood silent and still on the row by the Kali temple. He trudged off towards the village without looking back. A few drops of rain fell and the wind blew cold.

. . . He felt that he knew every detail, every line of that picture by heart now. It was a new acquisition of old Shripat's, he'd never noticed it there before, that picture; he must have got it up from Tryambuc. Should he break the silence that was getting so uncomfortable with some casual remark about the new picture? No, that would be accepting defeat; it would be too silly. He didn't want to know anything about the picture. But the colours were fine and bright. Saraswati, Goddess of Wisdom, reclined on a grassy bank, her jewelled fingers straying over her lute, at her side the peacock that is sacred to her. A fine peacock it was, all shiny green, and the tail spread out like that with tinsel on the eyes of the tail; tinsel too for the crown on the goddess' head. That was a wonderful idea. Well, they were always thinking of new things in the cities. Tinsel on a picture! why, whatever next?

Aeh ! he turned from the picture with a sigh.  
 “ So it’s no, is it ? ”

That wasn’t quite how he’d meant to say it. As Patil of the village he shouldn’t be talking in a whining tone, he should . . . well he should . . . well, what the hell else can I do ? I started off briskly enough, man to man, don’t you know. Must just have a little loan, see ? Oh, I know there’s a lot of interest owing on the last one, and the one before that isn’t cleared off . . . But, to tell you the truth (leaning over to give old Shripat a dig in the ribs and tell him about the girl o’ mine)—and then his voice, old Shripat’s voice, all colourless and thin, saying, “ Sorry, I can’t let you have it.” Well, that was a shock. Ah, but hardly unexpected. Deep down he’d been afraid ; he’d put off coming from day to day. He owed the Sowkar a lot and he’d no more fields to mortgage. But still, for a moment he sat stunned. It can’t be true, he told himself, it’s not true, see ? Old Shripat can’t bluff me like that, me the Patil of the village. But Shripat said nothing ; he sat cross-legged against the wall, his hands folded in his lap, his yellow shaven head lowered.

“ So it’s no, is it ? ”

“ Afraid so.”

“ Later on, perhaps ? ”

“ I’ve very little spare cash. I’m finding it difficult to get in my interest. It’ll be a hard winter for me.”



Extraordinary the way that peacock's tail glinted when the sun caught it. And the Goddess, Saraswati herself, she was wonderfully demon, pink and plump and smiling. The artist must have seen some fine girls in his time. Of course the girls in the cities . . .

But what am I to say to my girl? I promised her some more money to-day. I can't go and tell her the Sowkar refused me.

He shook his head violently. He had always enjoyed the respect she so obviously had for him as Patil, enjoyed bragging to her of the way he had settled a quarrel and got one of the villagers excommunicated by his fellows for some infringement of caste-rules. And when she had murmured, twisting one of the buttons of his coat, that Shripat was a powerful man, she had heard, how he had laughed. "Shripat powerful! my dear silly little creature. He's only a snivelling moneylender. No, my dear. There's only one man that's powerful in this village and that's me." And he had puffed out his chest and breathed deeply, and she had suddenly thrown her arms round him and hugged him. So he couldn't go back now and tell her he hadn't any more money and Shripat had refused to accommodate him. No, that was out of the question. Well, what was he to do then? God knows. Better get right away and try to think things out.

Slowly he struggled to his feet and turned to the door. And then he heard the Sowkar's voice



behind him, a very different voice from the hard thin voice he had spoken before, almost a humble supplicating voice.

“ You don’t bear me any malice, do you, Patil Saheb ? ”

He turned, leaning on his bamboo staff of office. Well, that was more like it.

“ You can’t expect me to be pleased,” he said.

“ You won’t believe me when I tell you in what difficulties I am. Many of my debts in this village will turn out to be bad ones, I can tell. This fall in prices has been—well, I lent money on securities which are now worth half what they were. Land was a fine investment a couple of year ago. Now it’s a burden. What can I do, Patil Saheb ? ”

“ I had hoped . . . however, if you can’t, you can’t and there’s an end of it. I won’t trouble you any more.”

“ Wait a moment, Patil Saheb. There’s one thing. Supposing—well supposing I did manage to let you have some money and perhaps wasn’t even very particular about getting it back—would you do something for me ? ”

“ Well, what ? ”

The Sowkar began dry-washing his hands, his face wrinkled up into a leer.

“ Haven’t you thought of a husband for your daughter ? There aren’t many decent houses in this village that a gentleman would care to send their daughters to. I’m an oldish man I know,



but I can give her every comfort. It's a fine house this, you cannot find a better even down in the cities."

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"Your daughter Bhimi . . ."

"You . . . you . . ." He stood over him, bamboo staff raised. The lowered yellow head was level with his knees. He had only to let his hand fall and the heavy bamboo rimmed with copper would crash through the brittle skull.

"You are mad, you old fool. I, the Patil, give my daughter to—to a man of no family? You should thank your guardian god that I am a man of even temper. For a moment you were very near to your end."

Shripat shrugged his shoulders and looked up.

"You refuse?"

"Of course I do," Shankar spluttered.

"Oh, well . . . How about paying me some of my interest, and the overdue instalments on my earlier loan?"

"Oh shut up, you braying donkey. You make me sick. You think money's everything. Trying to hug my daughter; that's the idea, is it?"

"Whatever the idea was, I'd be sorry to have to sell you up."

"What d'you mean?"

"The last document you put your thumb-mark to was a sale-deed of your lands, wasn't it?"

“ But you promised never to enforce it as a sale : it was just to be security that you wrote it like that.”

“ Never mind what I said. The document is a sale-deed pure and simple, and it's got your thumb-mark on it as plain as you please. Then you took them back on rent as my tenant. You haven't paid me anything as rent or interest on earlier loans or anything. I've only to file a suit in the Tryambuc Court to get the sale enforced and possession given to me. And that's what I'll have to do, I tell you frankly. I've got to call in some of my loans, especially those long overdue. But I just mentioned about your daughter in case the idea attracted you ; for, after all, I wouldn't be likely to be hard on my father-in-law, would I ? I wouldn't like to see him without an acre of land of his own. On the contrary I'd make him as comfortable as I could. And I'd start by letting him have a new loan.”

Bhimi was at first incredulous. Her father must have been joking when he said that, mumbling so faintly, and coughing almost apologetically. She said nothing, at first, but stared at him, pale and wide-eyed. He shambled off with lowered head.

“ Mother, it's not true ? Oh, say he's only



joking.” Bhimi caught her mother by the shoulder.

“I don’t think he’s joking, Bhimi.” She looked sadly round at Bhimi. What was the good of any make-belief?

“But . . . but . . .” She was stupefied. That old man . . . And people had often spoken about the fine marriage she might expect to make, had cracked heavy jokes, as they sat round the courtyard, about the handsome young Patil of some other village who was looking for a wife. And now . . . a Sowkar, a moneylender.

“He’s very rich,” her mother said gently. “You’ll be comfortable. And he’s a quiet old man. I don’t think he’ll trouble you much.”

“He’s got one wife, hasn’t he?”

“Yes, but she’s very old and ugly, poor thing. I fancy you’ll have everything your own way.”

“But, Mother”—Bhimi seized her arm—“but, you talk as if it was certain I should marry Shripat . . .”

Her mother sighed. “My dear child, we can none of us foresee the future. If we could we’d never enjoy one day of happiness. The marriage that you hope most from generally ends in misery. A marriage that you hope nothing from may turn out tolerable.”

“But why Shripat?” She was still groping.

“I think your father is very deeply indebted to him. Probably it was the only way to save his lands.”

“ Oh . . . ”

“ Yes, child, you may feel it that your father should value his lands so much that he—well, any way—you see, land is the family, and the family is the land. If we lost our lands we should be succeeded by some other family as *patilkis*. It would be dreadful for the patilship to pass to some other family, wouldn't it ? ”

Bhimi nodded helplessly.

“ And, after all, our duty, I mean especially the women's duty, is before everything to the family, isn't it ? You can be certain your father wouldn't have arranged this unless he thought it necessary, and I'm sure he feels convinced that you won't be unhappy. . . . ”

Bhimi got up and wandered out. Her mother sighed. What else was there to say ? I feel such a hypocrite. Nothing will save the lands. No matter how many loans Shankar gets, the lands will go in the end. But I think it may comfort Bhimi to think she will help the family. . . .

She sighed and went to the window. There was a crowd round the entrance of the liquor-shop ; I suppose Shankar is there as usual. Now he's flush with money there'll be hell in the house. And that other woman, the widow-girl . . . Ah, how can he ? He's an old man. Doesn't he see she's fooling him ? . . . The *karma* for sins in my past lives.

Bhimi walked quickly down the village street, hardly aware of anything save the desire to be



alone. Men were shouting inside the liquor-shop. She thought she heard her father's voice. He was laughing, yes it was he laughing. Oh . . . She pulled her sari tight over her head and broke into a run.

When she came to the river she sank down on a boulder and buried her face in her hands.

After a long while she heard a sandal clack on the pebbles of the river-bed. She looked up and saw Suka staring up at her. She rose to her feet and turned away. "I was wondering if I should meet you soon," he said. "I wanted to congratulate you on your marriage. All the village is talking about it. It was rather sudden, quite a surprise to me, I must confess. But I expect you're glad enough. You'll be rich, easily the richest wife in the village——"

She swung round, her face ashen, her eyes wild.

"Oh, stop, stop," she moaned. "Don't, for pity's sake, don't talk like that. Isn't it suffering enough for me, without your taunts?"

"I—I wasn't taunting you," he stammered. "I'm sorry."

"How could you say things like that? Don't you understand?"

"No—I didn't understand . . ."

"And you of all people, Suka." Her voice rose thin and shrill. "We were at school together and then we met that evening, and we've never met since, though I've often prayed—oh, I'm mad to speak to you like this. Forgive me,



I'm not myself to-day. It's been a shock to me," she added low and shudderingly.

He looked at her and their eyes met, hers so full of misery and longing. He went suddenly pale, turned and ran clattering down the river-bed.

Bhimi stood for a moment rigid, her hand raised to her face, then she began to trudge slowly up the narrow path that led on towards the wide sweep of the downland plateau. She was still wandering aimlessly when night fell; one moment the sun was a red shield glowing above the horizon, and the next it had dropped suddenly out of sight and daylight had gone and the world was plunged in a quick green twilight, a dim subaqueous luminance that faded to an ashen gloom as the stars came out.

She felt so weary that she sank down where she was, stories of bears that came up from the wooded thighs of the hills all forgotten in her despair.

She drew her sari over her head and was asleep almost immediately, but her rest was disturbed by dreams. Perhaps the starlight crept between her lashes and bemused her. She seemed in her dream to be standing alone on some lofty hill very near to the sky, and the stars turned just above her head so that when she looked up she could catch the flicker of thin cold flames. Was she rising slowly to Indra's heaven or the stars dropping earthward like a lowered net



with meshes of silver? She strained her eyes, puzzling. And then she realised with a surge of nausea and vertigo that the stars were below her and she was looking down on them. She was swinging like a pendulum in the midheaven and the stars spun with stealthy motion under her. Their flame still stirred but with heavy coiling movements like pale reptiles, lapping about a centre and pit of darkness that was empty and still. Each star was the same; she gazed at one after another with an increasing dread, an unreasoning longing to find one star that burned upwards with noble, spear-pointed flame; but there was none; all were sluggish whorls with inward-curving petals. And then the petals no longer raised even a broken wing but lay dank and flat. Not motionless, for they puffed and fell in at intervals like a lizard's flank. Or like some surface-layer of curd that bubbled gently in a cauldron. Oh, they were like bubbling sores on a diseased limb. All the sky lay there distended and still below her with those softly-bubbling sores. And then one by one the sores fell in, the seal was drawn in and absorbed, and the sky was dead, dead and cold; the body of a man long dead and embalmed, but still glistening a little where the balsams and juices of the embalmers had stained the pores. And then, a horror impossible to communicate, she felt herself drawn downwards, down to be embraced and stretched upon the corpse, the embalmed



and taut-skinned and glistening corpse. She struggled, screamed and awoke. She was stiff and her limbs were aching. It was cold and a thin dew falling. The dawn was breaking. A few feet away was the rear wall of the Mother-Goddess's shrine. (That's why I had so terrible a dream. . . .) She shuddered and got up, a malaria pain thrusting down her spine. On the roof of the temple a grey owl was watching her, his agate eyes a gleam. He raised his velvet-soft wings and flapped silently and gave his ominous cry.

Her face was dry and puckered with little pains. She went down to the stream to wash. Ah, that was better. The cold pure water revived her a little. She dried her hands on the long yellow grass that sprouted from the red banks of the stream. A faint light suffused the mist of the dawn and the heavy foliage of a teak-tree paled into gold. Over there the shrine of the Mother glimmered whey-coloured, the rust-red idol dancing in its shadows.

And then high above the shrine . . . was that a figure in mid-air, the thin dark figure of a woman, still and rigid, arms out and head thrown back? For a moment Bhimi thought she had fallen back into the thralldom of nightmare. It was as though she were gazing into a mirror of her own dream and seeing herself as she had been at the beginning of her dream. Then the arms of the figure fell and she remembered that a high



scarp of rock rose up just there from the turf-clad sweep of the hill-terrace, and hung sheer over a precipice. The next moment the figure stepped forward into space.

Bhimi ran forward through the frozen mist towards the bare outcrop of rock where the figure had stood. She stood on the edge, leaned over and peered downwards ; but there was nothing to be seen except waves of mist that rolled round and over like dolphins at play, or rose in a thin steam, tall blue columns with fern-frayed outline, climbing steeply and spilling over the edge of the hill so that soon Bhimi was drenched in soft-clinging spray. It was agony to be there helpless while somewhere far down a woman lay—ah, dead surely. She tried to convince herself that it was useless, nothing could be done now. Whoever had leaped from the hill-top must have leaped clean out of life. But there was the uncertainty—perhaps some jutting root had caught her and she lay writhing on the sheer face of the cliff—and who could it have been, and why had she jumped ? . . . She could have torn the mist apart in her hands as though it was a veil of gauze ; and then as she leaned and peered and called she felt the earth crumble a little under her knees and flung herself back in alarm and heard a few pebbles clatter down and a soft hiss of loose earth falling.

Then she ran back to the village to give the alarm, scolding herself that she had not done



that at once instead of wasting precious minutes—but what else would one do, it was stupid of me, but it's only natural that we would run to the place and look and call, but it was stupid—and she was still alternating scolding and excusing herself when she reached home and found the door bolted. When she hammered on it the half-wild mongrel they kept chained in the porch began to bark furiously. Oh, why don't they come? Surely there must be someone awake by now. And she shook the door wildly. Then she heard a shuffling step and her father's voice, querulous, "All right, all right, I can hear. You'll have the house down in a minute. Who on earth is it?"

As he fumbled he undid the chain and pulled back the bolts. The door creaked open and he stood blinking in the pale sunlight that already filled the street.

"Oh, it's you, is it? Well, that's one of the tenants returned home, anyway. You and your precious mother——"

"My mother——?" She lifted her hand to her throat.

"Well?"

"Isn't she in the house?"

"She is not. She ran out last night."

"Oh, it can't be true, it can't. . . ."

She raised terror-haunted eyes to his and then saw over his shoulder the young widow standing in the courtyard stretching herself lazily in the



sun. Then she understood and she told her father what she had seen.

“It must have been Mother, and I was so near. I might have called out to her. She would have recognised my voice. She would have turned and I would have run to her and taken her in my arms and drawn her away from the cliff-edge. I could have saved her had I known, and now she is gone.” Her voice had risen to a wail, the monstrous wail of a keen. “She is gone, oh gone, gone !”

Shankar called a search-party and they went down towards the teak-woods.

“You mustn’t come,” he told Bhimi. “If she went over that edge there is no hope and the jackals and vultures will have found her already.”

She shuddered and agreed with him, and lying in a darkened room by herself she drew her sari over her head.

Shankar was frightened. He stumbled along with the other men who formed the search-party, saying nothing and avoiding their eyes. Usually he rather enjoyed an occasion when he, as Patil, led a party of the villagers on some duty. But to-day it was his own wife they were searching for, and what were people in the village saying? His first emotion was shock and horror, but presently he was aware of a dull irritation. Why, why must she do such a silly thing—bringing him into discredit and shame with the whole village. After all, what is there in a husband’s



having a mistress, even bringing a mistress to the house? She ought to have been thankful I didn't propose marrying another wife. I might have married half a dozen pretty girls and given them all nice saris and turned her into a drudge. . . . And she couldn't pretend she was attractive any longer. After all, a man must have his own fun. That was exactly what he had said at the liquor-shop the night before, and urged on by the obsequious laughter of young fellows whom he'd been standing drinks he'd enlarged on the theme. Why, down in the cities, well, the stories he'd heard. What was there in a village after all? Damn all. So when you chanced on a pretty girl your luck was in and you were a fool to chuck away the opportunity. And what's the good of being Patil, anyway, if you can't do what you want? Fiercely he had glared round the liquor-shop and everyone hastened to agree. Very well then; with a gesture of a man who has won a hotly-contested argument he nodded and raised his cup to his mouth. And the more he thought of his girl, his little Gopi, the more he resented the thought of his wife, her patent resentment and unvoiced discontent, the contemptuous shrug of her shoulders and lift of her eyebrows—he could almost hear her saying, “Well, after all, a widow is hardly. . . .” Yes, damn it, she could always get you on the raw when she wanted, all under that pretence of meek obedience. But it was absurd that he should pay any attention.



To give himself confidence he loudly said again, "A man must have his fun," repeating the phrase resentfully as he stumbled and staggered down the steep slopes of the hill.

The teak-trees loomed up before them and there on a bare ledge of rock they found the body. Vultures hobbled away squawking indignantly. They had already had their beaks deep in the dull amber of the face.

After her mother's funeral Bhimi began to think of her approaching marriage almost with relief. The house was dreadful. She could not believe that her mother would never return, that she would not find her one morning quietly cooking in the kitchen as though nothing had happened. And sometimes she almost fancied she heard a dragging step go past her door and down into the courtyard, a heavy shuffling step, but recognisably her mother's. The fancy became so real that soon she became afraid lest in truth her mother's spirit were unable to find rest and were returning nightly to her former home. That was a frightful thought and she would bury her head under the fold of her sari and shiver with fear, for when a spirit returns like that it must always be malevolent, driven back and back to the haunts of its life by some unappeasable desire. And women who died as her mother had were



very often known to return. To prevent that Shankar had performed all the prescribed ceremonies, had taken the impress of the dead woman's feet on gold leaf and hung the two thin yellow footprints round his neck ; had scattered mustard-seed all the way to the cremation ground behind the bier and cast cotton-seed over the bier itself ; had driven an iron stake into the ground at the end of the village street immediately the corpse had been carried beyond the village boundary. Such scrupulous observance of the ghost-rites should have made certain the rest of her spirit ; but you could never be sure. The Pandit said they were infallible ; of course, he would make out that his knowledge was perfect, otherwise people would no longer pay so handsomely for his services if they were not certain how effective they would be. And then there were the *Bhuts* who fed on human flesh ; if one of them had got to her body while she lay in the house (they had watched carefully but someone might not have confessed to a moment's doze) then for a while the *Bhut* would take on semi-human shape, headless and having the eyes in the chest, till the effect of the nourishment wore off and the *Bhut* would fade out like the thin flame in a candle-socket at dawn.

Bhimi tried to crowd out these grim imaginings in the absorption of her household work ; for now that her mother was no longer there she ran the house. Gopi, her father's mistress, once or



twice offered to help her but Bhimi snubbed her. Nor would her help have been of much value. She was a lazy feckless creature who liked to sit and dream in the sun, leaning against one of the carved wooden columns of the courtyard, her face lifted like a sunflower. She was white and soft and apologetic. She tried to make friends with Bhimi and asked her where she got her nice green sari from and how she did her hair so neatly with the rosebuds tucked in over each temple—"Whereas I can never get my hair to stay neat for more than half an hour at a time." She shook her head and a coil of heavy hair fell over one shoulder. "Look at that now—however d'you keep your hair in place?" She touched the back of Bhimi's head, the contour of which was clear-cut under the sleek sweep of her hair. Bhimi jinked away from Gopi's touch and went on with her work (they were in the kitchen) as though she had heard nothing; hustling to and fro with brass dishes and platters of sewn banana-leaves, measuring out rice and sprinkling salt, muttering to herself and pursing her lips in self-conscious absorption. Gopi sighed, turned away, noticed a fine brass tray on a shelf, stood on tiptoe to lift it down, and brought it to the ground with a hideous clatter.

Bhimi spun round. "Aeh, Shiva! what on earth are you doing?"

"Nothing," Gopi quavered, "I was just admiring your nice brass things."



“ Can’t you leave me in peace a moment ? ”

“ I—I only wanted to be friends. . . . After all, we have to live in the same house, don’t we ? I didn’t especially want to come, but your father made me. Couldn’t you try and be a little friendlier with me ? ”

Oh, that drawling baby-voice, that persuasive childish reasonableness, and the head cocked on one side and the pouting mouth and consciously melting eyes. . . . Bhimi bit her lips and turned furiously to her work. One day she’d lose all control of herself and scream like a mad woman and heave a basin of boiling rice at the odious creature. What could her father see in her, so white and placid and nerveless ? . . . And all because of her my mother—ah, let me not remember . . . But then I shall be married soon and won’t see Gopi again, ever again. Only a few weeks now. It would be such a surrender to show her what I really feel. And anyway she’d run crying to Father and then there’d be more trouble—and, oh God, I only want a little quiet.

Her mother’s death and her approaching marriage somehow forged a new link of intimacy between her and her brothers. It was clear that they were ashamed of Gopi’s presence in the house, and blushed to think of what the other villagers were saying. But they realised that Bhimi was being married to Shripat to save their ancestral lands, and this touched them. Gyanu



came wandering into the kitchen one morning and after touching and patting the various bowls and goblets along the wall said with an assumed casualness, "Well, you'll soon be a married woman, sister. How do you like the idea?"

Bhimi looked up fresh from her cooking and brushing away a few hairs from her forehead said, "I can't pretend I liked the idea at first. I had never guessed who my husband was to be."

"Oh . . . but you mustn't say anything about that, must you? Your husband must always be like a God to you, mustn't he? Ah well, you ought to be comfortable enough with old Shripat."

Bhimi realised he was trying to console her for a marriage that he knew must be dreadful to her. She smiled at him.

"Oh, it won't be so bad, I expect. I wish he hadn't got another wife already, though."

Gyanu leaned over and pinched her arm.

"Rubbish. She won't trouble you. You'll be the favourite from the moment you arrive. It'll be you that'll get all the fun out of Shripat's money. You ought to feel sorry for the old woman you're coming to supplant instead of feeling sorry for yourself on her account." Bhimi laughed and changed the subject.

"I'm making some of your favourite *shrikan* for dinner to-day," and she pointed to a pot of sweet curds flavoured with almonds.



“Umn ! How lovely.” Gyanu popped his finger in and then sucked it with relish.

She was almost crying with weariness when at last, on the third day, they led her to the bridal room wherein was a low string cot sprinkled with flowers. She sat down and waited passively. The ceremonies were all over now and she was a wife ; she had attained the full dignity of a Hindu woman. Her life was now dedicated to her husband, to Shripat. And in her languor she felt no longer any emotion. It was fated, inevitable, nemesis. And after not very many years that old creature would die and she would then be a widow, her head would be shaved and the glass bangles broken brutally upon her arm. Yes, that would be fate, too. She shrugged her shoulders, and then suddenly stiffened, for she had heard Shripat's shuffling footstep on the stairs. He came in with self-conscious sprightliness, he shut the door and bolted it. He was, she noticed, wearing only a *dhoti*, one end of it thrown over his left shoulder, leaving the right breast bare. How hairless and thin and shrivelled he was, and there was a thin trickle of sweat shining down the midriff. He came and sat down on the cot beside her and peered at her ingratiatingly. Then he took off his large steel spectacles (the glasses were very strong and through them you saw his pale eyes glimmer vaguely like porcelain fish) and blinked myopically at her. She realised suddenly that he was nervous, but



he was trembling a little with desire. When he took her hand and began calling her endearing pet-names she found it hard not to smile, so ridiculous did it seem that this thin shrunken creature should utter such passionate sentiments in his hoarse unsteady voice.

. . . But she soon found that being complimented and flattered during Shripat's bouts of desire did not prevent him expecting a high standard of wifely obedience and humility on all other occasions. He explained to her carefully that she was to treat his other wife with the utmost deference ; and Bhimi (who knew her manners) had pleased him with the immediate obeisance she made to the grey old woman with whom she was to share the women's quarters of Shripat's house ; Anusuya her name was, a melancholy creature with a dry rasping voice, who from the beginning made very clear the resentment she felt at Bhimi's appearance in the house, and her determination to preserve her position as first wife. Bhimi tried to win her favour by a busy obsequiousness, offering to do all the cooking and cow-dunging of the floors, but all this Anusuya accepted without any gratitude or pleasure, and the words she exchanged with Bhimi were generally only of reproof—" Well, they didn't teach you to scour pots well in your house, did they?—Teh, teh, that's a funny idea of how to cow-dung a floor ; look how uneven it is. You should do it with a wide



sweep of the arm. If you just dab at it like that of course you'll get these ridges and dips in the surface," and she pointed with a beringed great toe at a minute dent in the dark stretch of wet cow-dung.

Bhimi sat back on her heels on her little straw mat.

"That's the way we always used to do it at home."

"Well it's not the proper way. When the cow-dung dries it looks most untidy and slipshod if there are great holes and ditches all over the floor."

"Holes and ditches? That's only a tiny little crack. There now," as she slapped on a handful of cow-dung from the basket that she held with one hand against her hip, "you can't see it at all now," and she smeared the new layer of cow-dung level with the old.

"Yes, that's better. Just a little more care never comes amiss to any girl."

It was the same with the cooking. The old woman wandered about the kitchen, doing nothing herself, but peering and poking at everything, lifting saucepan lids and sniffing the steam, prodding the simmering mounds of rice and chuntering. "It'll be a long while before you'll learn how to make rice properly. When I was a girl I remember people saying . . . You see every flake must be distinct and separate. A great sodden mass like this is a disgrace."



Bhimi had to bite her tongue to keep back the tart replies that occurred to her. She soon found it was useless to argue. The old woman only got angry and began to shout, and afterwards would complain to Shripat that Bhimi had insulted her ; and Shripat never would listen to her side of a quarrel, but would shake his head and mutter, "What did I tell you? You must be respectful to her. She is like a mother to you, so much older and more experienced. You promised me you'd treat her properly, didn't you——" And then often his tone of admonition would change to a maudlin wheedling as her presence excited him and he would grasp her hand and peer narrowly, amorously into her face.

"You *will* promise me, won't you? Do," and his cold fingers squeezed hers pleadingly.

"Yes, yes," she would sigh, turning away her head—oh, those pale peering eyes aswim in the mist of the owlish spectacles.

"That's a dear, good, sweet little wife." His thin fingers fastened on her shoulder, drawing her round towards him.

Sometimes she tried to simulate a sudden warmth of affection and then to exploit his delighted raptures by begging him to see her point of view. Instantly he stiffened, drew himself apart and looked at her reproachfully, like a schoolmaster bitterly disappointed in his favourite pupil.



“ . . . And I thought at last . . . I *did* hope . . . This has been a great deception to me . . . A Hindu wife presuming to question her husband's clear orders . . . ” The endless lecture with its feeble platitudes went on and on.

“ Yes. Yes. Oh, I'm *sorry*. I didn't mean anything like that. I wasn't questioning your orders. I'm always anxious to obey you, I wouldn't dream of doing anything else. No, no, you don't understand—— ”

“ Don't understand ? ” His voice rose shrilly. “ That's a nice thing to say to me. Me, and at my age. You little wretch—— ”

Bhimi burst into tears, but still the lecture went on, till at last he judged she had had her lesson, and then came the catch in his voice that she now knew and dreaded, the catch and falter and lapse into amorous baby-talk.

And the worst of all was that he must often have told Anusuya of these little scenes, for next day the old woman would taunt Bhimi in the kitchen.

“ So the new arrival isn't satisfied with the respect paid to her ladyship. She wants to become head of the household all at once. Well ! Well ! what a disappointment for her to find that she was wrong. And I am afraid there'll be a lot more disappointments in store for conceited little girls who don't know their proper place in the world.”

Bhimi soon found that one element in Anu-



suya's hostility to her was an obscure jealousy of Bhimi's family. It seemed to irk the silly old woman that although she, as the wife of the village Sowkar, had always had the grandest saris and the finest jewels of any woman in the village, still she was held in no particular esteem, whereas Bhimi's mother, while she was alive, even if she had gone in rags, was always greeted with admiration and respect as the wife of the Patil.

"Patil? . . . Patil?" Anusuya chattered. "What's the use of being Patil if you're a bankrupt old drunkard."

Bhimi's temper gave way at that, and she turned and shrieked like a mad woman, flung all the pots off the fire and ran screaming to her room, where she locked herself in and stayed all day.

She felt a little ashamed and annoyed at her outburst next morning. After all, what was the good of letting the old thing see how much her gibes wounded her?—that's what she intended . . . Better just keep silent and pretend not to hear. But oh, Father, how dreadful that anyone should say things like that about you, that they should come to know—and the warmth of her championship of her father in the house that she still regarded as a stranger's surprised her.

She was still arguing with herself as she carried the water-pots down to the stream, and on the way she met her father. He hesitated for a moment, noticing perhaps her pallor and her



sunken cheeks, and then spoke more kindly than she ever remembered him speaking to her.

“Child, you don’t look well.”

“I’m all right, Father. Perhaps I didn’t sleep well.”

He turned and fell into step with her and they went together down the boulder-strewn path that led to the stream. On their right the red flags on their high bamboo poles strained in the wind over the village temple and the Pandit was standing on the steps waiting as usual for his pupils . . . It was there that I first saw Suka ; how long ago ? Ah, centuries surely ; in some previous life . . . She shook away that insidious thought and bent her head.

“Aren’t you happy, child ? ”

“Why yes, Father. Why ever d’you ask ? ”

“I don’t know. . . . I only wondered. I’m so glad you are. I knew you would be.” He spoke with forced joviality.

They walked on in silence.

When they came to the stream Shankar sat down on the bank and Bhimi waded in to fill her pots. All along the stream women were washing clothes ; they thrust the squeezed-up bundles into pot-holes, let the saris and *dhotis* unfold in the water and billow up like sun-dried seaweed that opens up and spreads dark wings as the tide gushes over the rocks, plopped the clothes up and down till the water went yellow with mounting sand and lifted them out into the sun and



beat them with echoing clacks upon the granite boulders. Downstream some buffaloes wallowed happily. Paddy-birds walked stiltedly among the reeds and along the branches of a wind-bent babul-tree that overhung the stream, a company of egrets were like a fresh-fallen blanket of snow.

Bhimi bent down and saw the minnows dart away through velvet-warm water over the brown and pepper-speckled pebbles. She drew up the filled water-pots, staggering for a moment under their weight, and waded ashore. Her father sat on, blinking at the sky, as though he had forgotten all about her. How old and tired he looks, she thought ; I hope they're looking after him properly and giving him proper food. It was curious the motherly protective feeling that filled her as she looked at his lined, sunk face. Once she had almost hated him ; yes, hated, she repeated to herself. But now she felt a sudden throb of affection for the old man sitting there so frail and still in the sunlight. Perhaps it was Anusuya's sneer at the "bankrupt drunkard" that made her feel so suddenly defensive and protective. After all, he is the head of our family, the *patilki* family, the leaders of all the village community—and God knows who Anusuya's family were, I must find out one day so as to—oh, but why bother ; I must just pay no attention to her. I'm a little fool to mind so much what she says—it's only because she's jealous of me.



She plumped one water-pot down on the boulder where Shankar was sitting. He started out of his reverie and looked round, his eyes lighting up as they fell on Bhimi.

“*You’re* not looking so well as you should be, Father. I hope they’re feeding you properly. Does she (she hesitated to refer to Gopi)—do they give you all the things you like for dinner? *Kichadi* and *bajas* and all?”

“Yes, yes, sometimes. Not as well as you used to make them, Bhimi. Old Shripat’s a lucky man to have married such a good cook.” He pinched her arm, looking up at her.

She lifted the water-pot on to her hip.

“Aren’t you coming back to the village?”

“No; I’ll sit on here a while.” So she left him dreaming in the sun, dreaming, as it happened, of his widow-mistress and how lovely she was, and wasn’t it time he gave her another present, and would Shripat let him have another loan?—perhaps he might get Bhimi to ask him, he surely wouldn’t be able to refuse a pretty girl like that anything. . . .

Bhimi went on up the village street. She stopped for a moment at sight of Shripat’s house. Shripat’s house. She always thought of it as his; never as her own. She felt no more at home in it than when as a child she had gazed up at the gaudy paintings on the walls. It was certainly a fine building, with its bright frescoes and new-tiled roof and the carved window-



shutters of teak-wood. If things had been otherwise how proud she would have felt of it, how her heart would have been stirred just at the sight of it, standing so grandly there, visible from end to end of the village street. She sighed. Whenever as a child she had thought of herself as married, she saw herself living in a much smaller house, but with a splendid young Maratha as a husband and with three children hanging to her skirt. There would be a little boy, already sensible enough to follow his father's talk. He would wear a little cotton jacket and a strip of cloth tied tightly round his loins. Then there would be another little boy with a head shaven clean to avoid itch infection and stark naked. Last of all there would be a little girl, also stark naked except for a couple of silver chain anklets. She would have liked them to be of gold ; but then she knew that to put gold anklets on little girls was to run a great risk. Many a tiny girl had been murdered and flung into a well, just for its gold ornaments, so in her day-dreams she contented herself with adorning her youngest with silver instead of gold. The eldest boy would follow her about the house, chattering as he went, while the two younger ones rolled about the floor of the long room or made dust or mud pies outside the hall door.

She and her girl friends had often giggled together at the dodges adopted by young women married to elderly husbands to get



children. It was essential for a man's happiness in a future life to have a son ; and in any case to be a barren woman was deemed disgraceful. The commonest device was to walk round the stone embankment built round the base of the village pipal-tree. On hot evenings the peasants used to sit on it and talk interminably about local happenings ; but if a village woman began to walk on it, keeping her right side towards the pipal-tree's trunk, the villagers would all rise respectfully and go away ; for they knew that she was invoking the tree spirit to grant her progeny. This circumambulation was often quite efficacious and nine or ten months later a baby would be born. Cynical sceptics, it is true, scoffed at the alleged help of the tree spirit and in their wicked way hinted that the birth was due to a chance encounter during the Holi festival. The sight of a woman walking round the pipal-tree was a hint that she needed offspring and the village gallants were not slow to take it.

Some women made a pilgrimage to Jejuri, but one had to be rich to do that. Jejuri was ever so far away in the southern part of the Poona district. The railway fare was very expensive and the journey tedious. There was another objection, too. The priests there usually made the parents promise that if their prayers for a child were heard and a daughter was born to them, they would dedicate her as a *murli* or dancing girl in Shiva's temple. No doubt it was a high



honour that one's daughter should serve the Great God, but she ceased to be one's daughter. She had to stay in the far-off temple and she could never marry or give her parents grandchildren. Sitabai Lokhane, a Brahman woman married to one of the *kulkarni* family, had made the pilgrimage and taken the vow and had become a mother. Before her delivery she had been very frightened that she would have a daughter. Her fears were, however, baseless. She had borne a son and therefore did not have to dedicate him.

More popular than the Jejuri pilgrimage was that to the tomb of the saint Pir Mahbub Shah. It was a much cheaper and shorter journey ; but then it was the tomb of a Mussulman and in days gone by good Hindus of the higher castes had looked askance at it. At that time, it is true, the *Mutawali* or guardian had been a very old and unattractive person ; but he had died. His successor, the present *mutawali*, was a splendid-looking youth, tall and strong with a thick, bushy beard like a lion's mane. Since he had assumed office, pilgrimages to the saint's shrine had become far more popular, although the more devout Hindus still thought them not very respectable. A Maratha family in a neighbouring village had solved its difficulties by employing a young Brahman cook. He was well educated and had a great reputation for saintliness. He claimed that it was through his repetition of



*mantras* or holy verses of the most compelling powers, that his employer had obtained a son. The uncharitable had sneered that he had doubtless used other methods too ; but then as the Marathi proverb has it, " Crows will pick holes even in a cow's back ".

Bhimi smiled at the memory of this childish gossip, then a cold chill came over her. She, too, was married to an elderly husband and was without a child. She had been married for over a year and it was not likely that she would ever have one. She would live disgraced as a barren woman. In a sudden panic she began to think what device she had best adopt so as to make herself fertile.

One evening as she returned she came suddenly upon Suka. He was squatting behind a bush and she did not see him till she came abreast of him. He was squatting cross-legged on a boulder cutting a bamboo pipe. For a moment her legs went weak and she would have turned back, hoping to escape his notice. But he looked up and smiled, and the flash of those pointed teeth sent the blood to her face. He was clad only in a *langota* and his chest and shoulders bare. He was broad and sturdy, almost squat (like a Maillol statuette) but very strong.

" Why, Bhimi . . . "

" Yes ? " she said breathlessly.

" Forgotten all about your old schoolmate now that you're married, I suppose ? "



She tried to laugh. "Aren't you married yet?"

"No such luck. I'm too poor. Least, Father's too mean, and I've not got an anna of my own, of course."

"Oh . . ."

"What's it like being rich?"

She didn't answer. She choked down a sob. He looked up at her and then hurriedly away. When he spoke it was in a different voice, elaborately casual.

"Look, I'm making a little shepherd's pipe." He lifted the bamboo to his lips and blew some shavings from it.

"Supposing you were rich," Bhimi said suddenly. "What would you do with your money?"

"Ach, be off to the cities. Don't you remember my telling you?"

"Yes, I remember well. When we met over there by the Devi-Temple."

"Yes . . ."

"I must go on now."

He stood up and watched her hurry away down the winding path between the stunted thorn-bushes. Then he turned and began to call to his goats. He found that he was trembling.

After this Bhimi began to meet Suka regularly once or twice a week. She never admitted to herself that she purposely sought him; but she soon came to know where he was likely to be, to

what stretches of upland pasture he took his goats, by what way and what time he left the village and returned ; and she could always make some excuse to pass along the stream with her water-pots at a time when she would be sure to meet him. And he too would linger along the banks of the stream, looking out for her, sitting down for a while to try out his new flute, or examining the leg of one of his goats who seemed to be limping—and then when at last there seemed no hope of her coming rising to stretch himself sadly and make for the open plateau.

In cold clear-sighted moments of wakefulness at dawn Bhimi realised the danger she was running. She would scold herself for a fool . . . After all, we can't go on like this. He'll be getting married soon and'll forget all about me. And if Shripat finds out . . .

But the same morning as though Fate were playing into her hands, she could, on her way down to the stream, see Suka's red turban bobbing along towards her over the babul-bushes, for all that she had gone by the straightest path without any intention of meeting him. And then at sight of her his face so lit up that she could not but smile in reply and as usual they exchanged a few hurried words ; nothing of any import, phrases that she would not have remembered if uttered by anyone else, but which in Suka's mouth were magical. She would repeat them over and over to herself, finding impossible



subtleties hidden under banal sentences and a significant emphasis in simple words of greeting. And she would see again the sun on his broad chest, the dark nipples like rain-plumped berries, the slim waist and tapering thighs, and his round boy's face with the high cheek-bones and pale cat's-eyes. And thinking of him she felt the blood beating behind her forehead as she sat alone in her room, clasping and unclasping her moist hands.

Fortunately ~~the~~ banks of the stream near which they generally met were planted thickly with babuls and thorn-bushes, so that it was unlikely anyone would see their meetings if they took reasonable care. But it was difficult when they met in the public pathways not to exchange a covert smile, and one such sign of intimacy must have been observed and commented on ; for one morning Anusuya said abruptly :

“ I'm going to fetch the water to-day.”

Bhimi was too surprised to say anything. Her heart beat fast. She saw that the old woman was watching her. She shrugged her shoulders and turned away.

Now it was always Anusuya who fetched the water. Bhimi had no excuse to go farther afield than the village street ; and even there she found she was being watched. She was sauntering down towards the temple on a cool evening when, happening to look back, she saw Anusuya's face at an upper window, watching her.



That gave her a shock. What had they seen? Did they guess? Had someone told them, and how much? But worse than these fears and anxieties was the thought that it would be almost impossible to see Suka again—for many months at least, till their suspicions were set at rest. And he would meanwhile suppose that all was over, that she was purposely avoiding—yes, what *would* he think? She must let him know—must warn him. But how? And then the resolution grew. She would slip out one evening. She knew where his house was, on the outskirts of the village, a tumbledown little shack with mud walls and two sheets of corrugated iron for roof. He lived there alone with his old father. She would attract his attention with a pebble or two pitched on to the iron roof. She could just whisper to him there in the dark that they could not meet for a while and warn him to be careful—and then run back home.

He called out when he heard the pebble rattle on the roof and a dog in a near-by compound began to bark. Bhimi's heart stood still. She dared not cry out. Would they suspect thieves? There had been some robberies in outlying houses and people said the hill-robbers, the Bhils, were abroad. But Bhils come and go as quietly as panthers, they don't advertise their arrivals with pebbles; and in desperation she picked a handful of stones and threw them on to the roof. Heavens, what a noise—she'd not meant to make



such an earth-shaking clatter. Surely the whole village would awake and run out. But no, all was still quiet, all except the ceaseless yapping of that dog and the bouncing of her own heart. Then she heard Suka grumbling maledictions on whoever was disturbing him, and presently she caught the glimmer of a lamp through the chinks of the door and whispered, "It's me, Suka."

Tousle-headed he stood in the door, half-incredulous.

"You are mad, Bhimi."

Breathlessly she told him how she guessed that their meetings had been suspected. He stood very still for a moment and then said sadly, "I think you are right. But, oh, Bhimi, what a difference it will make."

"I shan't be happy till we can meet once more."

"I suppose . . . No, it's no good . . . It's too late."

"What?"

"Aeh, I'm only a poor goatherd. I couldn't ever ask that. What should we do, where should we go?"

"Oh, Suka, anywhere . . ."

"No, no . . . Your husband . . . Oh, Bhimi . . ."

They clung together, sobbing. Then she tore herself away and raced home.

She opened the back door and was congratu-

lating herself on the ease of her errand when she stopped dead.

Shripat was standing against a pillar in the courtyard.

"So you've come home again?"

"Yes—why, I only went out for a second. . . . It was so stuffy indoors. . . ."

"Nonsense, it's a cool night."

"Is it? I—er—perhaps I've fever. Feel my forehead, it's wet with sweat."

"You're breathing heavily. You've been running. That's why you feel hot. Where have you come from? Why did you need to run?"

"I didn't run. I feel feverish and unwell." She went on babbling explanations. Shripat obviously didn't believe her, but he wasn't sure, not quite sure. They went upstairs. At the end of the passage Anusuya was standing with a lantern raised, the yellow light falling steeply upon her face set in a grimace of cruel triumph.

Next day Bhimi was locked in her room and kept without food. She sat at the window and watched the people passing. They seemed all so happy, talking, laughing. Was it possible for one to feel such misery and for all the world to be unaffected by it? There went her two brothers, hand in hand. Should she call out to them? What use? Shripat would tell them that she ran out of the house at night—and what else would he tell them? Did he know yet? Had she perhaps passed the *jaglia*, the village watchman, without



noticing him—and would he tell Shripat that she had been to Suka's house? Why, they had clung together in the very door, and Suka had a lantern in his hand—anyone near would not have failed to see them. But, after all, Suka's house faced away from the village—only someone in the fields could have seen them, and who would have been out in the fields at that hour? No one, surely . . . Her brothers stopped for a moment at a shop, Sazna to buy some black cigarettes. It was for their sake and for her father's that she was married to Shripat, to save the family land. Then she remembered how Anusuya had sneered at her father for a bankrupt, and how some weeks later Shripat had told her, chuckling, "That old spendthrift of a father of yours had been round cadging for another loan, but I couldn't oblige this time." And the thought came to her that after all the land would be sold and her marriage to Shripat had not availed to save it. If that were so . . . oh, why hadn't Suka carried her off; they could have escaped from the village and gone down and away to the cities. What did it matter if they were poor. She could work . . . work at anything; why, it would be for Suka, and that would be so different from her daily work in the kitchen here in Shripat's house. They had told her how comfortable she'd be in the house of a prosperous moneylender—but what good was Shripat's money to her? It was stowed away there in his cupboard and he kept the key



knotted in his sacred thread—she'd felt it cold against her side the first night of her marriage and asked him what it was, and with a snigger he answered, "There's not a man in the village wouldn't sell his soul to have that key in his hands for half an hour." All that money locked away and no use to anyone. Then there was the drawer in his desk where he kept a few loose notes, he wasn't careful about that drawer, but contented himself with locking the door of his study and bolting it. But one could get in from the kitchen, if one knew the way . . . And then the resolution that had been prancing slowly rose to the surface of her mind. With even a few notes she and Suka could find their way to a new place and a new life. And she began to tremble with excitement and joy.

So, on the next day, when she was let out and allowed downstairs, she was all humility and gratitude. She kissed Shripat's feet and prostrated herself before Anusuya, shedding tears of penitence. They were cold and surly to her; but evidently they had not found out anything for certain; now they would watch her very carefully, and when they discovered what her game was they would know what to do.

For weeks (that seemed like years) she tried to lull their suspicions, and at last one night she was able to escape from her room down through the kitchen to Shripat's study. In the drawer were only three ten-rupee notes, but they were enough.



They meant food and drink for a long while if one were frugal enough. And then again she was at Suka's house. At first he shook his head in bewilderment, but she showed him the notes, crushed in her hot little palm. She shook him by the arm :

"It's our last, our only chance, Suka. You've always wanted to get down to the cities. This money'll get us there."

"But what about you?"

For a moment the thought crossed her mind that perhaps after all he didn't want her, he would prefer to go alone ; and she felt her knees weaken under her.

"How d'you mean, what about me?"

"We may starve before we find work in a strange town."

"I don't care if I do starve," she said, "I only ask a month or two with you. And if I'm a burden you can leave me."

"Bhimi ! you know I wouldn't leave you. . . . Wait a second."

He ran back into the house, and returned with a rug rolled up under his arm. In the other hand he held a lantern ; and together they went quickly out into the night.

They knew their way along the steep hill path that led from the village towards the inner hollows of the hills (that is, on the far side away from the teak forests and the coast lands), whose gorges finally led down to Tryambuc City and the arid

Deccan plain. An hour before dawn they lay down and rested, clinging together, cheek by cheek, yet too weary for further display of love. A couple of hours' uneasy sleep, and then Suka touched Bhimi on the shoulder.

"We must go on. We can't be more than twelve miles from the village and as soon as he discovers you've gone and taken his money, Shripat will have the village guards and watchmen out after us."

Bhimi nodded and sprang feverishly to her feet. Hand in hand they stumbled on, the ground falling away before them, sometimes in sleek mossy slopes, sometimes in jagged precipices. The light grew stronger and looking back for a moment they saw in the dream-mists of the morning the phallic scarps of the hills leaping gigantic overhead, black and portentous. The trees were thickening about them now. Under an enormous banyan was a shrine of the Monkey-God, erected probably centuries ago and long forgotten. A little bronze bell of fine barbaric workmanship hung before the image and Bhimi stopped for a moment to salute the God with palms joined under her chin. Then she tolled the bell and tearing off a corner of her sari tied it to a branch of the banyan-tree. Suka laughed gently at her, and she ran back to him and squeezed his arm affectionately.

"I'm thirsty, Suka."

"We'll find a stream soon."



He stood for a moment like a hound at fault. Then he pointed, "I can hear water somewhere over there."

The world seemed utterly silent.

"I can't hear anything."

"You've not been a goatherd, out on the hills in all weather."

They turned in the direction he had pointed, and presently came towards a stony river-bed, with a thin trickle of water tinkling down the centre from boulder to boulder, amid an expanse of greyly arid rocks and pebbles.

Bhimi gave a glad cry and was lifting up the skirt of her sari to turn forward and quench her thirst when suddenly Suka caught her by the arm and dragged her behind a tree.

"What on earth . . . ?" She turned to him, paling.

"Be quiet," he whispered almost savagely. Then she saw. From a shadow higher up the river-bed something had stirred into sudden life. It came warily out into the sunlight, thin and sleek, the muscles rippling under the taut bright skin, the flat and evil head moving slowly like a drowsy snake. A panther. The woods round were still (as death). A jay preening itself on a low bush saw the lean shape of death but a few feet away and rose with a shattering screech. Then silence fell again. A brown leaf circled, oh, so slowly, settled on the stream and was borne away. At last, perhaps reassured, the panther



came slowly down the river-bed. In its path not a pebble rattled, not a twig snapped. Ears flattened and tail rigid, quiet as a ghost, he slipped down the river-bed and away out of sight.

"You can have your drink now."

"Oh, Suka, but won't he come back?"

"Not he, he's abroad too late as it is. Must have been hunting rather far afield. You don't usually see a panther out after dawn like that."

When she had quenched her thirst they rested for a moment and then went on again. As the sun rose towards noon the heat oppressed them, the clinging moist heat of the jungle. The air was full of the metallic noise of countless insects, humming, clicking, whispering. Overhead not a breath of air stirred the heavy leaves. There was little bird song to cheer them, the occasional musical-box tinkle of a bulbul or deep bell-note of a Shamah. Their feet sank into moist red soil, on drifts of rotting leaves out of which rose rarely a cobra-lily. A company of grey monkeys watched them pass, tiny wicked eyes flickering in the black mask of their faces, the wrinkled masks of devil-dancers. Bhimi longed for a breath of the upland winds that she had always known; even in summer the hot breezes of May were clean and dry—never this dead weight of stale moist air enclosed by a canopy of leathern foliage. The sweat broke out all over her and her breath came in quick painful gasps.

"Let's rest again," she pleaded.



Suka shook his head. "We must get on. I don't want to pass the night in the jungle. With luck we ought to strike the great road to Tryambuc before dusk. I've heard people say, that you are bound to come out on it if you go straight on and down, keeping the hills at your back."

But there were many paths in the forest and before evening Suka had to confess he was utterly at a loss.

"We seem to be getting nowhere. Whenever there's a clearing you can see the forest stretching on for ever."

"And, oh, I'm so hungry."

He nodded, frowning. What a fool he'd been not to bring some food with him. He looked anxiously at Bhimi. How much longer would she hold out? It was wonderful she'd not given up before. He felt a pang of pity. Ah, once they were safe in Tryambuc he'd make up to her for this horrible journey. Her thin pale face looked back at him, dappled with sunlight and the leaves' shadow. He took her in his arms.

"Never mind, Bhimi. We'll find something, some way out, before the night comes. We will, I promise. So we'll push on just another mile or two. We've got to, haven't we?"

"Yes," she nodded, and lifted her lips to his. "I'll go on as long as my legs'll carry me."

And now they thought less of escaping from the forest before nightfall than of their increasing hunger.

“If only there was some chance of finding a papaia-tree or some coconuts. But you don’t get them this side of the hills.”

And then he stopped and Bhimi, who had been stumbling along beside him, with lowered head, felt his arm on hers, and she stopped and looked up.

Two men were standing in their path, naked, savage, with wild hair knotted on top of their heads and bows and arrows in their hands.

“Who are they, Suka?”

“Bhils.” (That is to say, of the wild forest tribes.) “Just stand quite still and don’t show any fear.” Then, raising his voice, “We are lost and we are very hungry. Can you help us?”

The Bhils came cautiously forward, one with an arrow fitted to his bowstring.

“Where are you from?” They spoke a clipped and guttural dialect.

“Velunji. Up there in the hills. We wanted to get to Tryambuc.”

“Why did you come by the forest way?”

“It was the only way we knew. We left Velunji in the dark. We hoped to strike the main road to Tryambuc, but we’ve been wandering all day.”

The Bhils spoke in whispers for a moment, then :

“We can give you shelter for the night.”

“Oh, thank you, thank you.” Suka clasped the man’s hand.

Their first suspicion wearing off the Bhils began



to chatter like children. They fired off questions, asking Suka how many sons he had, if his father was very rich (everyone who lived in villages or towns was in their eyes a millionaire), was he fond of hunting? To show their skill they let off arrows right and left, bringing down once a green pigeon and once a little brown monkey, both of which they picked up, for Bhils eat anything.

Presently they reached the Bhil encampment. In a forest clearing a dozen or so narrow kennels of matted rushes into which you had to crawl like an animal. In the centre a larger hut, decorated with coloured flags, was the chapel.

The Bhils crowded round the two strangers, the women surrounding Bhimi, their funny little black bunched-up faces staring up at her. A Maratha girl. They felt her sari in their fingers and commented on its fine texture (she was wearing one of the better saris that Shripat had bought as suitable for his wife). They asked her how long she had been married to Suka and how many children she'd had. *No* children. They chattered with amused surprise. Ah, only just married? But then, why are you wandering about in jungles instead of living sumptuously in your Maratha house? Going to Tryambuc. Ah yes, that's understandable. They nodded together. A fine place. A bazaar that gave you dreams for weeks after. And they told Bhimi how once or twice a year they went to Tryambuc to sell the parrots



that their menfolk caught young in the nests and tamed. It was one of their few means of livelihood, that catching of parrots, and of course thieving. Bhimi had always heard of the Bhils as terrible robbers, and she clutched to her heart the three notes that were hidden inside the sari. But she soon forgot her fear for her money, for the Bhils were so friendly and so obviously pleased and amused to have two strangers to pass the night with them.

A great cauldron was soon simmering over a wood fire and as evening deepened into twilight they gathered round in a circle. They showed Bhimi the parrots they'd already caught this year, dozens of clumsy little creatures who hobbled about and tripped over their own feet. Perhaps because the parrots helped to keep them alive or perhaps from some folk-memory of an ancient tabu, they had a sort of totem-feeling for parrots and never killed them, the only bird or beast they so distinguished. And in the stories that they told almost nightly as they sat cross-legged round their cauldron the theme of a parrot, a good wise kindly parrot, ran like an echo. Their stories, too, were always of kings and palaces, as though even in their present degradation they retained a faint memory of an age when they lorded it in the cities, before the Aryan with his long sword drove them to the hills and wastes.

They were pathetically fond of telling and hearing stories. "Do you know any new stories?"



they asked Suka and Bhimi, and when the latter shook their heads they sighed.

“We’ll tell you one of ours, then,” they said. Dinner was now over, and though Bhimi had eaten ravenously of the savoury mess, she often shuddered afterwards to think of the queer things that must have made up that huge generous stew.

One of the elders of the tribe was called on for a story, and after a moment’s thought he began :

“Once upon a time a Parrot was sitting on a branch overhanging a great river, and beside him sat a beautiful Starling on whom he had recently fixed his affections. As they sat talking a boat came floating down the river. It had purple sails and oars of gold, and the Starling flapped her wings with excitement and flew down to settle on the rigging, followed by her Parrot. Under a canopy a King lay toying with his bride, who had travelled across many seas before reaching that kingdom.

“‘Ah, what a happy couple,’ sighed the Starling.

“‘Happy now, but for how short a time,’ sighed the Parrot, who could see into the future.

“‘Why for so short a time?’

“‘Well, when the King reaches his capital three days hence, he will be met by his chariots, his horsemen and his war-elephants. A beautiful white horse will be led forward for the King to



mount ; but that horse will really be a demon in disguise. The moment the King is on its back, it will fly away with him into the air.'

" ' Oh, oh,' sobbed the Starling, ' is there no way to save the King ? '

" ' Yes, my pet,' answered the Parrot. ' If someone goes up to the horse, just before the King mounts it, and cuts off its head, the King will be saved. But don't repeat what I have told you ; for if you do, one-third of your body will be turned into stone.'

" ' But supposing he escaped from the demon horse, will he then be safe ? '

" ' No. His destiny is very crooked. Even if he escapes the demon horse still another peril awaits him. During the wedding feast the King will see an exquisitely worked gold dish before him. He will stretch out his hand to lift it. But that dish will be covered with poison, which will enter the pores of his hand, and he will die in frightful agony.'

" ' Oh,' shuddered the Starling. ' But can he escape from this horror ? '

" ' Only if someone, wearing a glove, snatches the dish away from before him. But don't repeat this or one-third of your body will be turned to stone.'

" ' And then, dear Parrot, I suppose the King will be safe to enjoy his bride ? '

" ' Not even then. For in the curtains of their couch a cobra will have hidden. And from his



fangs a drop of poison will fall on the princess's cheek ; and as the King leans over to kiss her his lips will close upon the poison. But,' the Parrot added hurriedly, seeing the Starling opening her mouth to shriek at this new terror, 'if someone hides in the curtains of the bed-chamber and, as soon as the poison drops glisten on the princess's cheek, leaps forward and kisses it away, that fate will the King also avoid. Nor will his saviour perish if he at once drinks a cupful of buffalo's milk. Don't repeat this, though, or a third of your body will be turned to stone. For you must admit,' she wept, 'three such escapes are hardly likely. And that poor lovely princess will be widowed on the night of her wedding and go to the flame.'

"Now as it happened the King's minister was sitting under the rigging and heard the birds talking. He was a loyal old man and he determined to follow the Parrot's advice and to save the King from these three dangers even at risk of his own life. So when the King landed and tried to mount the demon horse, the minister cut off his head. The King was furious, but the minister did not dare to explain his action for fear of one-third of his body being turned into stone. The King finally forgave him, in memory of his great services and loyalty. Then at the wedding feast the minister with gloved hand snatched the gold dish away from before the King, and once again could not justify his conduct for fear of one-



third of his body being turned to stone. The King dismissed him from his post ; but the minister went to hide himself in the curtains of the royal bed-chamber. Then when he saw a poison drop glisten suddenly on the princess's cheek he sprang forward and kissed it away, and then took a deep draught of buffalo's milk from a goblet he had in his hand. The King sprang out of bed and calling his guard cried : ' Hang the madman from the palace-walls.' Then, since he must die in any case, the minister told the King how he had heard the Parrot and the Starling talking ; and as he related the Parrot's warning about the demon horse his legs turned to stone, as he went to tell of the golden dish his body turned to stone, and as he ended with his reason for kissing the princess his voice died away into a dry whisper, and lo, his head also was stone.

"The King was so appalled at the fate of his poor faithful minister that he ordered the petrified body to be left there, and each day he garlanded it with fresh roses and set delicious wines and meats before it ; and the stone man never stirred, but stood always there by the curtains gazing straight before him with blank grey eyes.

"In course of time a son was born to the Queen ; and every day his father caught the boy and set him before the stone body of the minister to show him the man who had saved his life at the cost of his own.

"One day as he told his son the story of the



minister's doom, the same Parrot and Starling flew into the room.

“ ‘Alas,’ cried the Starling, ‘there is the King still grieving over the fate of his devoted minister.’

“ ‘And yet the King could bring him back to life if he wanted to.’

“ ‘Oh, tell me how.’

“ ‘Why, if he kills his son and sprinkles his blood over the stone body, the stone will be changed to flesh and blood once more.’

“ The King, judging his duty to be to his old friend, demanded such a sacrifice, drew his sword, cut off his little son's head and sprinkled the blood over the stone man. Instantly the minister came to life again ; but when he saw what the King had done he fell on his face and besought the Gods to take his life and restore to the King his son. The Gods were moved to pity and restored the boy to life without exacting forfeit from the minister. And the Parrot and the Starling flew out into the palace garden to the nest they had built in a tall mango-tree.”

Sitting round in their ragged squalor at the doors of their kennel-like huts the Bhils listened open-mouthed to the old stories that they had heard uncounted times before but whose charm and interest never failed. Afterwards the clown of the tribe gave a sketch. He had once been Shikari to an English official who had come out after panther in these woods, and his imitation of the Englishman was a favourite performance.



He shouted loudly, pretended to beat and kick people, stumbled over every stick and stone and made such an uproar that (as he explained in an aside) all the panthers left that part of India. Finally the Englishman handed (as baksheesh for the Shikaris) ten rupees to his subordinate, who handed five rupees to *his* subordinate, who handed three rupees to his underling, till finally the meek Bhil Shikari who had done all the work received with every mark of admiring gratitude a small pebble.

Next morning the Bhils showed them the way down to the forest fringe, whence they could see in the distance the great road to Tryambuc ; and before noon they reached the city.

The outskirts proved the *Mohulla* or Muham-madan quarter ; teashops, barbers' shops, patent-medicine shops, restaurants, all housed in corrugated iron ; gramophones and loudspeakers, bulbuls in painted cages, fighting quails squawking defiance in the dust ; the dirt and jovial clamour of Muslim insouciance. A mosque of white marble with great green doors. And then the high walls of the old city, rose-red sandstone walls, a gateway opening on the street, the doors with great spikes streaked with red lead and the arch topped with a pillared balcony of carved teakwood, and on either stone doorpost a carved lute-player with long slant eyes. Beyond the gateway stretched the old narrow secretive



Hindu streets ; thin windows with carved brown shutters, banias sitting sideways at the windows like people in a train, the sun catching their shiny bald-heads, and the walls of their rooms behind them glistening with gold paint. Temple after temple. A red or yellow daubed shrine at each street-corner, under each tree ; one shrine in the centre of the street parting the flow of traffic as though with a comb and inside the aromatic gloom pipes shrieking and the grumble of padded drums.

✂ Bhimi and Suka walked slowly hand in hand, half-dazed by the noise of the streets, the crowds and the shops. When they came to a less pretentious restaurant than the garish flag-bedecked palaces they had passed before, Suka nudged Bhimi and they went in through the narrow doorway between a barricade of bottles of lemonade, ginger-beer and drakshsava. They sat on a bench against the wall of the inner room and ordered tea and *puris*. Bhimi took one of the notes from her bodice and slipped it to Suka, who waved it with a grand air at the proprietor, adding severely, "And bring the change, please."

They watched greedily the hot frothy milk being poured out into the tea. The proprietor brought two coarse cups and banged them carelessly down so that tea splashed over upon the puddy surface of the rickety iron table. Suka lifted his cup with both hands and drank a few mouthfuls. The proprietor stood watching them,



fists on hips. He was a fat, pleasant-faced Maratha, glad of a chat at any hour. He and Suka exchanged the usual polite preliminaries.

“Then foreigners?” asked the proprietor.

“Yes,” nodded Suka, “from one of the hill villages.”

“What’s the news there?”

“None. People are very poor. There is no work, no work that is for a man to fill his belly on.”

“Here, too, is little work. Even a coolie’s job is hard to get. The peasants can’t pay land taxes and come in to the city for manual labour.”

“Is there no chance of my getting work here?” Bhimi looked up, frightened, and let the fold of her sari, which she had drawn modestly over one side of her face, fall apart, as she leaned forward and listened for that terribly important answer.

“Well . . .” He paused to consider. “There are always casual jobs. Just at the moment there are many pilgrims arriving and if you don’t tire easily you could always get taken on as a palanquin-bearer.”

“That would carry me on for a few days, anyway.”

“Oh yes, and some of these rich Gujarati widows,” he winked coarsely, “pay their palanquin-bearers very well.”

Suka laughed and leaned back against the wall, stretching his legs.

“I’ll just run and see if your *puris* are ready.”



The proprietor flicked his duster over his shoulder and waddled off towards the kitchen.

“Seems we won’t starve anyway,” Suka said, “if I can get a job as a palanquin-bearer. If it’s just a matter of muscle I don’t suppose any of these town-rats will be anything compared to me.” He stroked his arms complacently.

“Oh yes, and I’ll get some work to do, too.”

“There’s no need, Bhimi, if I can get something.”

“For a while, anyway, I must work. After all, your palanquin job mayn’t last for ever. They may be only needing extra men for the moment.”

“When they’ve seen how strong I am . . .”

“Yes, but still I’d like to work . . .”

And so when the proprietor came back with a brass dish filled with fluffy puri-cakes all aglisten with melted butter, they asked him what sort of work Bhimi could find.

“Why, in one of the cotton-ginning factories she’ll get taken on at once and glad to have her. Long hours, though.”

“I don’t mind that.”

The proprietor nodded approvingly. “That’s fine. Well, ask at Haji Rahim’s factory—anyone’ll tell you where it is—and I think you’ll be pretty certain to get taken on.”

“And then where can we stay?”

“Why, at any of the big dharamsalas.<sup>1</sup> I’m afraid they’ll be pretty full just now, but you’re

<sup>1</sup> Dharamsala : free lodging-house for the poor.



sure to be able to get in somewhere. Of course you can only stay about ten days in a dharamsala, but by then you'll have found a place of your own. I should try the Goculdas dharamsala down by the river. It's a big place and they're sure to have a room or two vacant. It's a fine dharamsala, too. Old Goculdas, I remember him well, he used to come here on pilgrimage from Bombay every year. A rich banker he was, they say. Anyway, he left a lot of money to build that dharamsala." And when they had finished their *puris* and drained their teacups, the proprietor went with them out into the street. "Now straight ahead, down to the river, and then branch off sharply just before you get to the bathing ghats."

They found the place without difficulty. A double-storeyed building with sloping roof and wide balcony surrounding an inner courtyard (not unlike a Dickens coaching-inn, a European would have remarked) and having a little garden set with papaia-trees, hibiscus and tuberose. For a time they hung about the front door, hesitating to enter so imposing a building, till a servant came out, asked their business and took them in to the Manager's office. The Manager had been one of Goculdas's poor relations ; the banker in his will had left him a generous salary to run his dharamsala. He was a plump little Gujerati with a fine sense of his own importance. As "Manager" (a title he was enamoured of) he



felt himself a high official and considered he should dress the part. So he had had clothes copied from a very ancient English fashion magazine of the cyclist or Sherlock-Holmes-cap epoch, and dressed always in knickerbockers, Norfolk jacket and white waistcoat.

He was pleased with the obvious awe his clothes inspired in the two villagers and became very fatherly.

“You can have a room free for ten days, and use the communal kitchen. And if you want anything just come along to me.”

Suka salaamed very low with a grateful “Ram-ram”, and the Manager handed them over to a servant.

Their room overlooked the river. People were still performing their *sandhyas* and ceremonies of washing, and along the banks strolled parties of saffron-robed Brahmans, their heads shaven like the Celtic tonsure of Simon Magus. Between the bathing ghats the river stirred sluggishly, purplish-grey, sleek-rolling as a seal. Beyond were many terraced houses with sloping tiled roofs, and over all the hills rising from undulations of moist green to crags of black basalt.

Their room was a tiny cubicle, but to Bhimi a place of enchantment, for it opened at each end on a verandah, looking on one side over the river and on the other the courtyard. A few people were finishing their meal down there, for all meals were taken together in the colonnade that sur-



rounded the courtyard. The communal kitchen, which Bhimi soon ran down excitedly to inspect, was a long square room with red-washed walls, and narrow pits in the floor in whose bellies the fires were kindled, and balanced on whose edges a few pots still simmered. Bhimi asked an old widow-woman, whom a little amber flag held tightly in her withered hand proclaimed a pilgrim to Tryambuc, where she could get maize and flour ; and the old woman begged her to accept some of the chapattis she had cooked for herself and a little jar of milk. So Bhimi and Suka had their first meal in Tryambuc sitting happily together in their little room (for the hour of the communal dinner was long past) and Bhimi felt that she had never till then learnt the meaning of happiness—to be in a room of her own, alone with her man. And after they had finished the dish of chapattis and drained the milk they gave themselves up to love, making up for the delay and distraction of their long journey.

As the café proprietor had foretold, Suka found it easy enough to get a job as palanquin-bearer. He shared a swaying bamboo palanquin with another Maratha lad. Many pilgrims were coming at that time of year. The palanquins waited in a line by the city gate along the wall of a huge temple of the Mother-Goddess. At the city gate the buses and lorries that brought so many pilgrims had to stop, for beyond the gate the streets were too narrow. Only in one place



in the old city did the main street broaden, where a tributary of the river emerged from under an old bridge. There the road split in half, advancing on either side of the stream, and there were trees along the bank, and little bridges with carved balustrades ; and here, too, were the grander shops and a few old palaces with huge carved doors and shutters of black teakwood and orange-painted walls. And here the palanquin-bearers raced along the few hundred yards of open passage, challenging each other and taunting those who fell away often through no fault of theirs, but because they were burdened with a heavy passenger and paying no attention to the warnings and scoldings of the fat little merchants or pious old women who jolted, scared out of their lives, in the narrow basket-seats of the palanquins. After paying their respects at the Mother's temple by the gateway the main concern of the pilgrims and tourists was to be carried up to the top of a great cliff just beyond the city where was a very ancient shrine of the Goddess, built over the source of the river. A long weary climb that was and Suka got to know every step of it by heart. Every few paces was a new shrine with attendants clamouring for alms and beggars exposing their ailments ; and every hundred yards sat an anchorite smeared with ashes under a yellow umbrella, saying nothing but watching the passers-by with deep drugged eyes. As you climbed higher, leaving behind the shady mango-



trees and gold-mohurs, you came to the sheer face of the cliff and the path of ascent was by a narrow stairway cut in the very rock. The cliff-face was scarred with little caves having in each some hermit, and at intervals a lined and haunted face would peer out, either half-hidden by matted hair or framed in a red peaked capra with ear-flaps. Some cried out for alms, or agitated the string of their baskets, in which the faithful placed offerings of food, and which were then drawn rapidly up to the mouth of the hermit's cave. Some had gone mad in their solitude and screamed obscene insults out at the world below them. At last you came to the end of the climb and bent down under a low square doorway and were in the ancient shrine, cut out of the black rock. At one end was an archaic statue of the Goddess, thin and angular, a terrifying grin curving round under her beaked nose. And at her feet a thin trickle of water seeped out of the wet moss that covered the floor of the shrine, and then bubbled down into the bowels of the hill.

Friday was the best day of all ; for then there was always a procession from the Goddess's temple by the city gate down to the bathing ghats. The crowd gathered in the courtyard of the temple ; a wide quadrangle bordered with the cells of the priests, and set alone with flowering trees in green tubs, having in the centre the great shrine, an enormous pyramid of black stone, the pillars of the doorway most intricately carved, and the roof



rising steeply in a wave of climbing gods and heraldic beasts. Up, up, the figures thinning out into archaic totems leaning inward and thrusting long arms towards the golden umbrella that shaded the shrine's summit, and whose brittle fringe tinkled in the breeze—the warm wind of the plains stirring the saffron robes of the Brahmans grouped about the shrine's stairway, rustling the orange-trees in their painted tubs and lifting the heavy amber flags sacred to the Goddess. Presently, to the moan of gongs and blaring of conches, swaying in a little silk-curtained palanquin hung with bells, came the Goddess ; a huge mask of beaten silver propped up on a stiff brocade was draped about a crimson pillow. Blank empty eyes, fixed grin, and nostrils curving like a Sassanian mare's. The people shouted "Jay ! Jay !" and the procession went slowly through the narrow streets, drummers and flute-players squatting in a painted cart hung with plantain-leaves, anchorites in panther-skins or striding naked with ash-smeared bodies, priests nodding their shaven heads and children running and clapping, the palanquins of the rich and aged, and over all the banners and horsetail plumes, the flags of amber and ochre.

Yes, on these Friday processions Suka always earned good money. He was strong and willing, and did not haggle like most of the palanquin-men.

And then after the procession there was still



time for a visit to the little temple up the hill at the river's source. Suka smiled happily whenever his "fare" suggested that ; and he didn't need many rests by the way, nor would he let the beggars stop the palanquin and pester for alms.

He didn't return to the dharamsala till evening ; for his midday meal he bought a few chapattis off a bazaar-stall and crumbled them into his mouth and washed them down with a cup of water from the fountain by the city gate, an old iron fountain topped with an image of Shiva from whose head the water ran, in allusion to the Ganges which falls sheer from Shiva's hair.

The other palanquin-bearers either took an hour off and went home for a meal and a short siesta or sat round the fountain till their wives brought them some bajri-cakes and spiced potatoes and chillies wrapped in a handkerchief. But now Bhimi was working in the cotton factory and so Suka only saw her in the evening. She pretended to like the work and laughed and chatted of the little details of the day ; but Suka noticed that she was looking tired and haggard, and once when he questioned her, she admitted to a bad headache.

"But nothing really," she added hurriedly. It was only the heat in the factory. For indeed the air there was fetid, and there was an engine on the floor below which throbbed unceasingly, making all the workroom shake and quiver and sending up hot gusts of dry heat. The floor-



boards were thin, the walls ramshackle and for the roof a few sheets of corrugated iron wired together ; so that when the engine increased its speed, churning and moaning down below like a sea monster in pain, the whole building pulsed in unison and the brass bangles of the working women rang together. In two long rows they sat, facing each other, squatting like frogs, while a few inches below their feet the shiny roller, spinning sleekly from under the boards, splayed out the rough cotton for them to comb. They plucked out the grey beetle-like seeds, shredded the tangled knots, and then let the handfuls of cotton slip forward with the roller between a sharp-toothed mangle that converted the lumps of confused fluff into a soft and even stream of silver. You could not pause or rest a moment, nor look about you, nor brush away the hair that kept falling over your face. With its soft hiss the roller spun relentlessly, and if you let the unshredded cotton run forward into the mangle-teeth they would become choked. Mechanically with one hand you caught the cotton, and with the fingers of the other drew out the seeds, parted the knots and then sent on and down with the sweep of the roller, your hand already splayed out to catch the next bunch of cotton.

With hands down and hunched shoulders they worked, the sun beating on the corrugated iron sheets above, the walls re-echoing the drumming of the engine. The overseer walked down be-



tween the two lines of women, calling out orders, urging greater speed in a melancholy sing-song voice. They paid no attention to him, nor lifted their heads as he passed, but kept their eyes fixed on the shiny roller endlessly returning. Outside in the yard coolies called to each other as they piled the cotton into cotton sacks, and the stuffed gunny-bags plumped over dully in the dust.

When at last evening came and the day's work was over Bhimi could hardly walk, so stiff were her limbs and so weak and faint did she feel. But she always put on a smile and a resemblance of gaiety for Suka's benefit. And when on Saturday she brought home a week's wages how proud she felt of herself!

But Suka began to worry over her pallor and obvious weariness.

"You must give up this factory," he told her.

"No, Suka, not yet awhile. We can't stay much longer in this dharamsala. And then we'll have to pay for a lodging."

They argued for some time and to change the subject Bhimi said, "Well, we are a stupid couple, discussing how we shall pay for a lodging of our own, when we haven't even started looking for one. And that's a thing we must do."

Suka laughed. "Right as usual. Let's go out and look now."

"Ah, very well to say look. You've no more idea than I have where to look." Then she added, "I know, I'll ask that old Gujarati widow



who let us share her dinner the first day we arrived here.”

From her they heard of rooms in one of the old palaces converted into a *chawl* for workpeople.

“Two rupees a month the rent should be,” she told them. “I’m thinking of getting a room there myself.”

“Why, aren’t you going home ever?”

“I don’t think so. I came here on pilgrimage, but there’s no one who will miss me. The grandchildren told me to hurry and return, but I know they find me a nuisance. He’s only a clerk getting a few rupees a month, and mine is another mouth to fill. I’ve got only a few ornaments of my own that I can sell. When they’re finished I’ll sit and beg by the gateway of the Goddess’s Temple.”

“Ah, don’t say that . . .”

“Why not? I’m an old woman and can’t live much longer. If only I can die in this holy place I don’t mind how my last few days are spent.”

She said this smiling, without affectation or self-pity, and having directed them to the *chawl* went down towards the river, and sat down by a little red idol of the Monkey-God. When they looked back they saw her take out from the folds of her sari a handful of golden champak and lay the blossoms reverently along the flat head of the image so that they looked like a crown.

They chose a room in the *chawl* on the first floor, that happened to be empty, a little room



barer and darker than the one they had in the dharamsala ; but to Bhimi it was a joy at last to have a room absolutely her own.

“ But two rupees a month,” she said, shaking her head. “ You’ll agree now that I can’t leave the factory.”

“ Unless I could get a better job. There must be heaps available.”

“ I wonder . . .”

“ Why shouldn’t there be ? I’ll try for one, anyway.” And as she still seemed doubtful, “ Don’t you think I’d get one ? ”

“ Why, of course. Anyone would be proud to employ you, if only they had a place vacant. The other women in the factory tell me about their men being without work.”

“ Well, I’ll keep on with my palanquin, but I expect I’ll get something better soon.”

He said this confidently, but a few days’ search sobered him. No hotels needed servants, nor shopkeepers assistants. He approached a few of the richer merchants offering his services as a night-watchman, but even if they had had a vacancy they would not have employed a Maratha, for it was the fashion always to engage a Pathan or a Gurkha for such work.

By the following Sunday Suka had to admit that there seemed little hope of other employment. He was depressed and restless.

“ Oh, never mind, Suka,” Bhimi urged ; “ what on earth does it matter ? I’m getting



used to the work in the factory. It was tiring at first, but that's because I wasn't accustomed to it." And then she told him that she'd like to see the temple on the hill that she'd heard so much talk about.

"Nothing much to see."

"It's nothing to you, because you go up there almost daily. But I've not seen it at all."

"If you want to, we'll go."

They went up slowly, Bhimi resting at intervals. She was amused at the crowds, filing past up and down, and it was fun to see the innumerable tricks the mendicants resorted to to get a pice or two out of the passers-by. Bhimi and Suka were not bothered either by the priests of the innumerable shrines along the steps, nor by the beggars, for they recognised him as one of the palanquin-bearers and there was an understanding between all those whose business derived from the pilgrims.

As they climbed higher the heavy mango and papaia-trees of the plains gave place to stunted thorn-bushes and little clumps of Glory Lilies, whose lovely blooms are golden at the edge and in the centre vermilion. Looking back they saw the temples of the city, their granite cones flecked with white doves ; and in the streets the people streamed like ants, and the carts, their painted hoods nodding, were like children's toys.

Presently Suka noticed, a few paces ahead, a new *sadhu* ; a fair youth in the traditional panther-skin squatting under an ochre umbrella,



with huge brass rings in his ears. But what distinguished him from the other anchorites was that beside him was a mound of books, and he had a ponderous volume open on his knees, nor did he once look up to solicit alms.

With the frank curiosity of the Oriental Suka stood and stared, waiting till the newcomer should look up to question him.

At last the *sadhu* raised his eyes and Suka saluted him, "Ram-Ram".

"Ram-Ram", the *sadhu's* was quiet and pleasant.

"You have come recently?"

"Oh yes, last night."

"You are not from this country?"

"No, I came from the South Konkan coastland."

"Oh . . ."

"Sit down a minute." He pulled his books towards him, making room for Suka on the square outcrop of rock where he sat. Bhimi squatted down opposite them.

The *sadhu* told them that he was a Brahman, that he had been in the Police, but that he had suddenly wearied of the world and become an anchorite. He told them that his name was Pralad.

"Will you be here for long?"

"I think so. I had a curious dream last night. I had been up to hill-temple in the evening. Coming down I felt tired and rested here. I must



have fallen asleep just while sitting like this. When I woke up it was quite dark and, as I judged from the stars, getting on for midnight. I wondered whether I should walk down to the city or remain here, and I had just decided to return to my dharamsala near the river when I heard a movement in the shrubs over there. And there were two eyes like topazes watching me. I remembered then having heard people in the dharamsala speak of the panthers outside the city. I sat quite still, my heart beating like a drum, and I prayed to the Goddess to help me. And then out of the shadows came a black dog who curled himself up at my feet and then I felt no more fear. A moment later there was a movement in the bushes and the eyes were gone. Then I fell asleep again and dreamed. I thought that a tall woman stood beside me and called that dog, and the dog awoke and ran over there"—he pointed—"and began digging with his forepaws, and after a while he had dug a hole like a well and fresh spring-water spurted out. And then in my dream it was noon, and all the pilgrims climbing to that temple up there stopped and drank from the well."

"And so . . . ?"

Pralad shrugged his shoulders—"And so I stay on here. I am certain that my dream was a command from the Goddess to dig a well here for the pilgrims climbing to her shrine."

Suka looked doubtful. "It doesn't look to me



as if there is a spring there.” He went over to the spot Pralad had pointed to and kicked at the turf with the toe of his sandal, “I should think the rock is only a few inches below.”

Pralad shook his head, “A dream so clear as that can’t be ignored.”

“How will you dig it?”

“Engage a few fellows who aren’t afraid of work.”

“Well, I wouldn’t mind working at that—provided, of course, we don’t bend our spades in rock at the first thrust—but what’ll you do about paying us? We can’t work for nothing.”

“I shall put up a notice here on this tree-trunk asking for donations, and if the response is good I can engage people at once.”

“At how much?”

“Say twelve rupees a month.”

“You wouldn’t consider fifteen?”

Pralad laughed. “You’re a hard bargainer.” But when Suka told him that he needed the money to free Bhimi from working in the factory he at once agreed. “Of course, I don’t grudge it to you. I can’t keep any myself. But that’s all dependent on the donations of pilgrims. If I don’t get anything I can’t pay anything, can I? How many men would be necessary for the work?”

“I’d only want one other—at first, anyway. And then there’d be the spades and picks.”

“Will you get those for me in the city? And



bring a friend with you. Come back in the evening. I shall stay on here now till the well is finished."

When they returned that evening they found that Pralad had nailed up a notice on the tree-trunk near which he sat, a notice written, he told them, in English, in Marathi and in Gujarati. The idea apparently attracted almost every passer-by either from the novelty of the appeal (which related Pralad's dream in detail) or from the traditional Hindu solicitude for the wayfarer.

Suka had brought his fellow palanquin-bearer, a loutish young Koli, silent and tractable. They set to work digging under the tree, and to Suka's surprise the earth seemed deep. Must be a pocket here, he thought, between two ridges of rock ; and Pralad's hope of finding water there no longer seemed absurd.

"Of course, if we find water," he told Pralad, "we'll get some masons to put in stone walls and a low parapet. But I thought it useless to get any more workers till we had an inkling whether we'd find water or not."

"You'll find it all right," Pralad assured him, and then returned to his books under his umbrella.

At twilight Pralad distributed between Suka and the Koli all the money he'd collected that day. "But, of course, after to-day, I'd better keep it till the end of the month and then pay you proper wages."

"You're not coming down to the city?"



“No, I’ll sleep here.”

“But the panthers . . . ? ”

“If the Goddess saved me one night she’ll not abandon me the next.” And, in fact, next morning he was able to tell Suka that the same black dog had come out of the shadows as soon as full darkness had fallen and had curled up at his feet.

Now Bhimi was able to leave her factory. She had gasped with joy when Suka had shown her the handful of coins (mostly anna-pieces or brown pice, but totalling in all a respectable sum) that Pralad had given him that first evening. With an immense relief and uplifting of the heart she now agreed with Suka that it was absurd for her to work at the factory when they had enough to live on. So she spent her mornings in the market along the river haggling with the villagers, who came in with their poultry and vegetables to sell in the bazaar, and when she had bought some vegetables (brinjals, lady’s fingers or lal mirche) she returned to the *chawl*, feeling delightfully busy and occupied. In their little room she lit a fire in the sunken trough that was fireplace and oven and began to bake some flat bajri-cakes and chapattis ; the vegetables were stewed for thick soups or used as flavouring for sauces to eat with the chapattis. One of her first purchases with the money Suka had given her was a set of brass and aluminium pots, pans and dishes, which she arranged on a shelf. She polished them daily, rubbing them to



a fine sheen, and always felt a little stab of pride when she saw them there in a row on the shelf, so bright and grand-looking. Besides these their only possessions were two little mats for sleeping on, a wooden box for Bhimi's spare sari and bangles, and a coloured string stretched across the room for Suka to hang his shirt and *dhoti* on.

When Suka's dinner was ready she tied the chapattis in a cloth, poured the soup or sauce into a brass pot with a screw-on lid and a handle and set out. When she was still a long way off she could see Pralad's ochre umbrella. It was a stiff climb and she was always out of breath when she arrived. Pralad told her to rest beside him, and even after Suka had finished his meal and returned to his digging, Pralad would urge her to sit on. His voice and manner were very gentle and soon Bhimi was talking with him as though she had known him all her life. She used to worry him about his diet, telling him he wasn't getting enough to eat. She did not dare offer to cook for him, for after all he was a Brahman and would be defiled if he agreed to that. When she questioned him he told her that he went down to the bazaar at dawn and bought a little milk and some fruit.

"Wah!" Bhimi scolded, "that's not enough for a man."

"It's enough for me," he smiled. "I sit here all day, hardly moving. I need very little to eat."



She shook her head. He was very thin and of an unearthly pallor. Under the dome of his shaven forehead his eyes (an opaque and cloudy yellow in colour) were bright as though with fever. The panther-skin that he wore did not conceal the shadowed hollows between each rib.

“You could take fruit from a non-Brahman,” she said suddenly.

“Yes.” For it is the cooking by one of inferior caste that defiles. “Why, the fruit I buy in the bazaar is from villagers.”

After that Bhimi always brought him a few slices of papaia, a tamarind or a pomegranate when she came with Suka's dinner. Then she sat beside him and talked. She told him about her childhood and her mother ; but she never mentioned that she had run away with Suka, for she felt Pralad would be shocked and upset, so fixed and severe is the universal Hindu view of marriage. Then she questioned him about his life ; and he seemed glad to tell her of it. Sometimes she did not understand his phrases, but presently the whole picture unfolded in her mind as she listened to him.

First there was his father whom everyone called Dada Saheb and treated with ceremonious respect. To Pralad he seemed immensely old. He was already white-haired and half-bald and he leaned upon a stick when he walked. He had a huge hook-nose and eyes of pale yellow deep-set under bushy eyebrows. He was fond of Pralad



(a son born to him at last late in life, and by his second wife) but seemed awkward and embarrassed with him, as indeed he was with all children. He would pat Pralad's head and set him on his knee, ask him a few perfunctory questions and then relapse into a day-dream. Pralad was always brought to see him in the mornings when Dada Saheb was drinking his tea, and would be given a lump of sugar dipped in milk to eat. Then Dada Saheb would go to the family chapel and remain there for two or three hours, absorbed in prayer and meditation. Never in all his life, even when racked with fever, had he omitted to spend several hours a day in prayer. He observed rigorously all the fasts of the Hindu calendar, and every morning read many pages of sacred poetry, following the lines with his long forefinger and murmuring to himself the sonorous Sanskrit verses.

In the afternoon he would be in his study and would receive the visits of his *clientes*, the poor Brahmans who depended on his charity and came to him for advice, or of the peasants from his estates who brought their quarrels for him to settle or petitioned him for a postponement of the annual rent. Sometimes they had business in the town and then they would ask him to hear one of the village songs. He would be sitting cross-legged, very stiff and dignified, a pile of coloured cushions behind his back, and the peasants would file nervously in, grinning sheepishly and nudging



each other to speak first. One by one they would kneel down and lay their turbans before him and murmur "Salaam, Sardar Saheb", and he would nod and smile kindly at them and tell them to sit. They would squat down on their heels in a semi-circle round him, talk first of the season, the quality of the crops, the rumours of the bazaar, and only after a long while broach the object of their visit. If they sang their village song or recited some old lay telling of the war of independence against the Mussulmans, Dada Saheb would gravely commend them, and sending for his secretary tell him to give them a few coins. Then with many expressions of respect and gratitude the peasants would file out backwards, salaaming repeatedly.

Presently a servant would bring a great tea-urn, a tray piled with cups, and a silver dish set with little mounds of various spices. As afternoon faded into evening many of Dada Saheb's friends would drop in for a chat and a cup of tea. They sat cross-legged in a circle, lean proud old Brahmans with pale eyes and great patrician noses. They all dressed alike; the scarlet hat of their rank with its swinging gold tassel, long buttoned coat with shawl of coloured silk, white *dhoti*, and sandals or scarlet slippers. They sat there stirring their teacups, munching pan-leaves that stained their lips bright crimson, cracking betel-nuts between their strong white teeth, and talking endlessly. The tea-urn was many times



refilled as new visitors came in, and, bowing to the assembled guests, squatted down and took their place in the circle. They talked of philosophy and religion, quoting long paragraphs of the Sanskrit classics and capping each other's quotations. To them the heroes of Hindu legend were more real than anything in the world about them. And then they would turn to a discussion of philosophy. They were all adherents of the Vedanta school, and would agree that all existence was non-existence, that the gods and all mankind, the past and the present and the future were all alike an illusion, and that the only reality is the impersonal soul which is behind and beyond the universe.

If the evening was cool, Dada Saheb would call for his hat and long coat and set out for a stroll with his friends. The direction of the walk was invariably the same. They sauntered down the main street of the town, which, having been built in former times for the triumphal processions of Maratha Kings, was very wide and straight ; and they stopped at a little shrine of Kali on the outskirts of the town. This shrine was set upon a mound, and looking back they could see the town spread out at their feet, the cones of the temples recalling in their unchanging pattern the bell-shaped tents of coloured felt in which the Aryans hid their gods when they wandered in the steppes of inner Asia. They sat by the roadside and pointed out to each other the beauties of the sun-



set and the pale sickle of the moon rising above the forehead of the hills. A band of pilgrims passed, singing a plaintive lament and bearing upon their shoulders an empty palanquin—empty I mean to human eyes, but the pilgrims believed that their God rode within. And after them a fat Parsi merchant jolted noisily over the uneven road in a Ford, sounding his horn incessantly.

“What a contrast,” said one Brahman to another, “the old India and the new.”

“Yes,” sighed the other, “happy pilgrims, untouched by the miasma of western barbarism. To our grandchildren India’s culture will be but a memory.”

In the temple behind them the lamps were lighted, a bell rang loudly and the voice of a priest intoned the evening prayer. The Brahmans rose to their feet and joined their hands together under their chins. In the temple little oil-lamps flickered on the shaven head of the priest and on the eyes and menacing sword of the dark goddess ; the goddess who nightly destroys the beauty of the day, who is the consummation of time, who will one day annihilate all Brahm’s creation and the Gods, who is Mahakal, the End . . .

When he returned from his walk Dada Saheb would visit his wife’s room for a few minutes’ conversation. They would greet each other ceremoniously, clasping hands under chin in the Brahman gesture of salutation, and then squat-



ting opposite each other would exchange formal courtesies and compliments.

Pralad's mother was a robust and handsome woman with an oval wheat-pale face and pale-blue eyes (those pale transparent eyes that betray the chitpavan Brahman—"look at her cruel Brahman eyes" she had often heard whispered after her and felt elated). She was fond of jewellery, she wore magnificent ear-rings and a nose-ornament of pearl and emerald, and she carried her saris of Benares silk with the air of an empress. She had a quiet, malicious humour and often made Dada Saheb chuckle with her spirited account of the details of her daily life. She was very severe with the servants and her voice could often be heard raised in anger as she scolded her secretary or covered the shrinking sweeper-boy with violent abuse. After a while Dada Saheb would rise and salute his wife with the same ceremonious gesture and retire to his study, while she would hurry off to the kitchen to supervise the preparation of the evening meal. And Dada Saheb sat alone in his study, a book open upon his knee.

When Pralad was ten years old his father consulted the most reliable astrologers in the town to fix an auspicious day for his son's thread girding. Pralad was pleasantly excited by all the bustle and confusion and enjoyed his new importance in the household; uncles and aunts descended on the house, patted him on the head



told him he had grown, asked him what lessons he had learnt and gave him little presents. The front porch of the house was adorned with a triumphal arch of palm-leaves and bunches of plantain. A band arrived and squatted down in front of the house, blew loudly in trumpets, clashed cymbals and beat frenziedly upon kettle-drums. Pralad ran about clapping his hands with excitement, till the family priest scolded him and said he should be spending the morning of this great occasion in meditation and prayer. Presently his mother called him in for dinner. He wondered why she seemed so quiet and sad. Then he remembered that it was the last time he could ever share a meal with her. Once he had donned the sacred thread he would be a man and could only eat in company with other men. The thought sobered him. Never to dine again with his mother and his sister, Sushila ; it was difficult to believe, and he thought in a moment's panic that it would be very frightening sitting alone every day with his father, so old and silent and severe-looking. Usually he squatted with Sushila, telling her she had taken too many treacle-cakes and teasing her because her long hair was so difficult to keep tidy and would fluff up in an untidy mop all over her head. But to-day he was very gentle with her. She realised the reason and began to cry quietly. Then the priests came and called him, and he walked off, very grave, frowning importantly.



The ceremonies seemed endless. All the uncles and cousins watched Pralad, smiling together because he seemed so serious, as if in truth he realised the tremendous import of that day. And now the singing was finished and a priest questioned him. "Are you desirous of becoming a Brahman, a full member of your father's caste?"

"Yes," he whispered, blushing.

They brought a low stool and Dada Saheb squatting thereon called out to his son. Pralad ran to him and nestled in his arms. They covered father and son with a great shawl and then retreated to a distance out of earshot. Dada Saheb whispered in Pralad's ear, "You have said you wished to become a Brahman, and for that you must learn the secret verse," and he murmured the holy words that only a Brahman may know, so low that Pralad could hardly hear them.

"Now repeat the verse so that I may be sure you have the words by heart."

Fumblingly Pralad repeated them, and three times they said them over together. Then Dada Saheb cast away the shawl and stood up. The priests came forward and raising their arms called down blessings on the child, the new young Brahman, the Twice-Born; and they put upon him the sacred thread which goes obliquely across the chest from shoulder to hip and is tied with the three knots at the waist.

And now an old Brahman Pandit came every



morning to teach Pralad English and Sanskrit. Pralad waited for him sitting at a table in his father's study, and soon he heard the shuffle of the old man's footsteps. He kicked off his red slippers at the door, laid in a corner of the room the umbrella that he carried to shelter himself from the sun, and sat down at the table beside Pralad. Usually he felt hot from walking and took off his faded red hat and laid it in his lap, and Pralad could see the beads of sweat glistening on his bald skull, yellow and wrinkled as old parchment. He drew from his pocket a pair of steel-rimmed spectacles which he set awry on the end of his nose, opened one of the reading-books on the table and began to read out an exercise in a high sing-song voice. He was a dry and humanless pedant and took no trouble to make the lessons interesting. One day they had read an English exercise, describing in the jargon common to all reading-primers, the beauties of nature.

"How beautiful the trees are," the Pandit recited in a flat monotone, "their leaves are green, and they are very strong and tall. When we see them we should think of the great God who created God and all the world.

"Which God was that?" Pralad asked with a sudden awakening of interest, hoping for one of the entrancing myths his mother used to tell him.

"God," answered the Pandit shortly.

"But which? Shiva or Vishnu or Krishna or



who? My father worships Shiva, I know, because of the three ochre lines across his forehead, and some people have the vermilion trident of Vishnu between their eyebrows."

"Let us get on with the lesson. These great trees——"

"But, Pandit Saheb, I want to know."

"Does your father never instruct you in the doctrine of our faith?"

"He never speaks to me of it."

"Wah! You are old enough to understand. After all you are a Brahman now, and it is absurd that you should know only the fables of the nursery." And he began to tell Pralad the esoteric meaning of the Hindu mythology. He spoke in a dry mincing voice, using many words which were unintelligible to the child; it was as though he was repeating a careful excerpt from a catechism. "In the beginning, you see, there was nothing, no substance active or inactive, only the impersonal essence, the neuter, unknowable and undefinable. And then (how or why we do not know) this unknowable passed into a conditioned state comparable to the passing of a man from the abyss of profound sleep up to the dawn-dreams; and this new level of the essence we call Ishwara, the first self, the mover and cause of all things. Then again as a man passes on from dreams to full consciousness, so did the Ishwara become aware of matter, which till then, though inherent in the Ishwara, was unmanifested be-



cause unrealised. This matter essence has three aspects : motion, equilibrium and dissolution. And these aspects we call the three faces of God, the Trinity ; the first aspect is Brahma, the second Vishnu and the third Shiva. Each aspect is expressed in action or power ; and since *Shakti*, the Sanskrit word for that, is feminine, the power is personified in goddess-form."

" But the Gods do exist, don't they ? We pray to them for favour and help, and to various Goddesses."

" Exist ? What does that mean ? Everything exists and yet, since existence is a quality of perfection and nothing that we know of is perfect, nothing can have reality. There is only one thing certain, that everything we know of is in varying degrees a part of the illusion of our senses."

" But is there one God, or are all these Gods different ? "

" One is the Godhead but the wise call Him by many names," and so saying the Pandit returned to his lesson and refused to enlighten Pralad further.

Pralad continued to puzzle over this and one evening asked his father, " Do the Gods really exist ? "

" Of course," Dada Saheb snapped, " of course they exist. Have you been listening to some wretched missionary ? "

" No, but the Pandit Saheb was telling me that



the Gods are all really one God. He said nothing is real, and so perhaps even the Gods aren't real. How can something exist and yet not exist ? ”

Dada Saheb thought for a while and then answered, “ Because there are varying degrees of existence. A thing may exist only relatively ; it may have an existence in a world which is in itself an illusion. To people living in that illusion the thing has an actual existence ; but seen from the level of pure spirit nothing in a material universe has any reality. But since we have one being in this dream-world we must accept it as it appears to our senses. So far the Gods do indeed exist and we must reverence them.”

“ I don't understand, Father.”

“ You will when you are older.”

But Pralad began to wonder why it was necessary to go through all the elaborate ritual of a pious Hindu's daily life when no one could explain to him this business of the Gods. Sometimes when he was passing that little temple of Kali where his father daily ended his evening walk he felt a vague resentment that he should bow and salute a something he could not understand. And then through the doorway of the shrine he would catch the gleam of candle-light on the Goddess's silver mask, and the great staring eyes seemed fixed piercingly on him, and he shivered in a panic spasm. Mechanically, as



always, he lifted his clasped hands to his chin and bowed to the dark Goddess.

He often tried to draw the Pandit into another discussion, but the old man always answered, "You'll understand everything when you are old enough to study the Upanishads and the Vedanta philosophy. Come now, take up your Sanskrit primer."

Pralad would sigh and relapse into a day-dream. The old man's voice droned on, his clawlike fingers with long dirty nails wandered across the ink-stained pages of the book.

"Now this is a fine passage. Listen. The God Krishna speaks to his beloved, Queen Rukmini."

Through the open window Pralad could see the morning sun warm on the red-tiled roofs. In the field behind the house he heard boys from the local school playing cricket. Ah, to be with them, running and laughing in the cool freshness of the morning, instead of huddled over his books.

At noon the Pandit rose, gathered up his umbrella and hat, slipped on his red shoes and with a gruff salutation shuffled off into the street. Pralad went out to the courtyard and began his ablutions, pouring water over himself from a small brass jar and rubbing his body with perfumed oil. He took off his white cotton *dhoti* and put on one of scarlet silk, drawing one end over his left shoulder, but leaving the right breast bare.



With saffron chalk he drew three horizontal lines across his forehead ; and then squatting in the sun he awaited his father.

The family priest came out of the chapel wrapping a thin silver shawl about his shrunken shoulders.

“ Are ! Pralad, why don't you say your noon prayers properly like your good father ? ”

“ I've said them,” Pralad lied sulkily.

“ Teh, teh.” The priest shook his head. “ You must have gabbled them. Do you think the Gods will take any pleasure in such grudging service ? ”

In the chapel Pralad could hear his father's voice raised in prayer, and when the voice paused for a moment he heard the drip of holy water falling from a perforated vessel upon the white lingam, the phallic emblem of Shiva. Presently he heard the tinkle of a silver bell and knew that his father had nearly finished. A moment later Dada Saheb stood in the doorway of the chapel and cried, “ Peace . . . Peace . . . Homage to our Lord Shiva.”

Pralad followed his father into the long airy room where they took their meals. The walls were whitewashed, without pictures or decoration. The floor was plastered with dry cow-dung. Opposite the door were set two low stools on which Dada Saheb and Pralad sat cross-legged to eat. In front of each stool was a large plantain-leaf, along whose rim were arranged little silver



bowls containing spices, cucumber in cream, sweet Indian corn, sliced mango in honey. All round the plantain-leaf Pralad's sister Sushila had drawn elaborate patterns with coloured chalk. She was clever at this and enjoyed doing it ; first an outer circle of spirals and swastikas, then a row of saffron conches and coiled cobras, palm trees with golden trunks, and two splendid green peacocks bowing their heads in homage to a red image of elephant-headed Ganpati.

It seemed strange at first to Pralad that his mother should wait on him at meals, bending down and moulding little pyramids of savoury rice on the clean fresh-smelling plantain-leaf, ladling out new delicacies into the silver bowls. He felt embarrassed and stared at her feet, at the heavy bangles jingling over her ankles, and the gold rings on her toes. But after all he was a man now and it was proper that women should wait on him ; and when Sushila followed with a vessel of *ghee* and bent over to pour a few drops on Pralad's rice he grinned and whispered, " Go on, more than that ; you know how I love *ghee*." But Sushila put her tongue out at him and scampered back to the kitchen.

Dada Saheb usually ate his meals in silence, and Pralad was surprised when one day his father turned to him and said, " Well, my boy, have you ever thought about College ? "

" What, the local school, Father ? " He had been brought up to despise the boys who went to



the big school in the town, for they had to mix with the sons of quite low-caste persons.

“No, the Rajwada College in Poona. You know enough English by now ; and it’s time you began to study seriously with boys of your own age.”

“Shall I play cricket and tennis there ? ”

“Of course. But you’ll have to work hard. The College is expensive and I’ve not much money to spare nowadays. I have to save up to give Sushila a proper dowry.”

Pralad was as much excited at the novelty of leaving the little town in which he had been born and passed his childhood as at the idea of College. When a tailor arrived and measured him for an English suit he became very pleased with himself.

“Shall I wear English clothes always in Poona, Father ? ”

“No, no, Pralad. You will wear a *dhoti* on all ordinary occasions, but you can wear a white shirt and English coat on top. That’s the fashion for young fellows in Bombay and Poona now. And then on special occasions you can wear a full English suit.”

“The trousers are awfully tight and uncomfortable.”

“You’ll soon get used to them.”

But though Pralad was glad enough to change back into his cool airy *dhoti* he liked boasting to his sister about his new clothes.

“I am a man now. They wear English suits



and go to grand colleges in Poona. Girls stay at home and get married.”

“Don’t be silly, men get married, too. And no one’ll want to marry you if you are so disagreeable.”

“In Poona I’ll play cricket and tennis, and I’ll smoke and drink——”

“Father, *did* you hear? He won’t smoke and drink, will he?”

“Indeed, I hope not.” Dada Saheb was very shocked. “I hope no Brahman would so defile himself.”

“There!” said Sushila and pulled a face at Pralad. He tried to catch her by one of her pig-tails but she escaped and ran out into the courtyard chanting triumphantly, “Defile himself, defile himself, who’s going to defile himself?”

The day of his departure came. He said good-bye to his mother in her room. She refused to come out for fear of crying in front of the servants. He had bought a little bangle for Sushila and wrapping it in tissue paper slipped it shyly into her hand and then hurried out into the street. The bus was waiting. His thin trunk had been strapped on the roof and Dada Saheb stood chatting with the driver, who answered very obsequiously, “Yes, Sardar Saheb; no, Sardar Saheb.” Pralad went up to his father, slipped off his sandals, and bent down to touch his father’s feet. The old man laid a trembling hand on his head and blessed him. He climbed into the bus



and sat there feeling on a sudden very small and lonely. He saw Sushila's tear-stained face at her window and waved frantically to her. The bus jerked into motion . . .

It was perhaps not in such detail that Pralad told Bhimi of his childhood, but such was the picture in his mind that he tried to convey to her ; and even if she did not always understand phrases he used or scenes he described, it was all like a delightful fairy-tale to her, a door opening on a strange world, the world of the Brahman town-dweller. She squatted opposite him entranced, her eyes wide, hardly aware of Pralad himself (sitting so still in his panther-skin and droning in his soft voice) or of the pilgrims passing up and down the hill-path that led to the old temple of the goddess at the river's source. And when in the evening Suka and his companion finished their day's work of digging the well and rejoined them Bhimi awoke to the present with a start. Goodness, how the time had gone. Bhimi sprang busily to her feet and dusted her sari. She excused herself to Pralad for having troubled him, but he smiled happily at her ; now that he had forsaken the world it gave him a queer sad pleasure to recall his boyhood, which already seemed to him as though part of another life. And on the following day when Bhimi brought Suka his lunch and some fruit as usual for Pralad it only needed a few shy questions from her to set



Pralad asking, "Well, what would you like to hear of now?"

"You had just left your home for school; I'd like to hear about your school. It must have been very grand. I went to school in our village—but it was a poor, rough affair. A Pandit taught us in the village temple." And then she smiled to herself and laid her hand on her breasts, for she remembered that it had been at the very same school that she had first seen Suka, and from that first sight of her man how inevitable had been the turn of her life.

Rows of white-clad figures bent over their desks, scribbling in dog-eared little notebooks. They were studying English literature. One boy, standing up, began to recite the sonnet he was supposed to have learnt by heart.

"You're not alone when you are still alone. O God! From you that I could private be."

"Yes," nodded the Professor; "now translate into colloquial English that phrase, *From you that I could private be.*"

Silence.

"Tell me what it means in your own words. Come along, come along. Don't you *know* what it means?"

The boy wriggled uncomfortably, twisting his bare feet.

"Next. Next. You, Vasudev."

Vasudev shuffled his books hurriedly and began to read out from the crib. "The poet, being



dissatisfied with terror of amatory events, expresses hearty wish that he might altogether end affair with lady and cease thinking of her."

The Professor sighed. He was so tired of this particular crib. Was there no other on the market? And the syllabus for the annual examinations never varied. *Jones' Hundred Best English Poems*. And year by year he heard the same flat renderings recited from *Babu Subash's Guide*.

"Yes, go on now, Pralad."

Pralad closed his book and stood up.

"Since you one were, I never since was one. Since you in me, myself since out of me."

"Good," nodded the Professor, "and do you understand that?"

"Yes," smiled Pralad, and the Professor knew it was true. A good boy. I really think he loves English poetry. That time he burst into tears over "Lucy". I thought he was ragging me. It's rare to find boys nowadays who can see anything in poetry. And yet we used to. We used to read Wordsworth and Shelley for hours in our spare time, cry with joy and excitement. But it was all a new heaven and a new earth then; England and freedom and the West. But that's all gone now. Modern boys are so hard and self-centred. I don't know what they're interested in—oh, wireless and motors, I suppose. How one used to laugh at the old Brahman die-hards who



anathematised our enthusiasm for the West. And now one wonders if perhaps they weren't right. All that fire and passion has turned to ashes and bitterness in our mouths.

The clock on the College tower struck twelve and the boys began to shuffle restlessly, slipping on their sandals, shutting their books noisily.

"You may go," said the Professor. Pralad was slower than the others. He picked up his books and tucked them under his arms, arranged the folds of his *dhoti*, bent down to slip a sandal-strap over his instep.

"Not in such a hurry to be off as the others?" smiled the Professor.

"No, sir," Pralad said shyly, "I'm always sorry when the English lessons are over."

"Come to my room for a chat."

Professor Joshi had a little room in the tower. A bed in one corner, a roll-top desk, a rocking-chair and bookcases along the walls.

"What a lot of books you have, sir."

"Come in and borrow any you want whenever you feel like it."

There was an etching of the Strand over the desk.

"What's that place, sir?"

"It's a famous street in London. That is a church where Dr. Johnson used to pray—and he used to have his meals in that little building there . . . You remember we were reading his *Rasselas* last term."



“It’s a fine street.” Pralad couldn’t think of anything better to say.

“I was only in London six months and I used to have my midday meal almost every day in one of those little eating-houses. They are very old, you know, and all sorts of famous men have dined there. One feels back in the world of Dickens.” For to him the characters of Dickens were as real as the heroes of the *Ramayana* to an orthodox Pandit. In the endless day-dreams in which like most Hindus he loved to pass hours of calm happiness the inns and ostlers, the smoke and fume of a legendary London seemed as real to him as anything he knew of in his waking world.

“Did you like England, sir?”

“It was wonderful, wonderful. In those days we idolised everything English. We thought that it was by the beneficent guidance of Providence that they had conquered India. We thought that the collapse of the Mutiny was a sure sign from heaven that the chapter of ancient Hinduism was closed for ever, and that the path of advance must be through this new culture. Oh, and English poetry and the word “Liberty” were so new to us then. We weren’t interested in politics, but we read Mill and Gladstone’s speeches and Shelley’s ‘Song to the Men of England’, and how wonderful they seemed. We could have worshipped the nation that produced such men. Of course, you will not understand, and now even I find it hard to recall my first enthusiasm. It’s all



chilled now. The War, of course, and the War's aftermath."

He stared out of the window. There was a moment's uncomfortable silence, and then Pralad asked to be excused. "I'm secretary of our dining club," he explained, blushing.

"Then you mustn't be late or the others will scold you. But do come and see me every now and then. And borrow any book you want."

Pralad smiled his thanks, gathered his books under his arm and scampered downstairs and out in the glaring noon. "I hope I haven't kept the other fellows waiting"—for, as he had told Joshi, he was a secretary of one of the dining clubs into which the richer students organised themselves, and it was his duty to see that the meals were properly served. Between them they would club together their pocket-money and engage a servant to cook for them; and they could get permission from the College authorities to reserve one room especially for their club-meals. As at home in their Brahman households they ate their meals squatting on low stools ranged along the wall, each with a large plantain-leaf spread before him for the rice and little bowls for the spices. The servant drew rough patterns round each plantain-leaf, but these were crude daubs quite unlike Sushila's careful drawings of cobras and peacocks. And the boys sat in a row eating delicately with their fingers, invoking the Names of God at each sip of water, sprinkling water



round their stools to secure them from the assaults of demons. Pralad observed the orthodox ritual from good manners, for he didn't believe any longer in the Gods, but did not wish to hurt the feelings of anyone who did. They did not change into coloured silk *dhotis* as at home, but pulling off their white shirts drew one end of their cotton *dhotis* up over the left shoulder, leaving the right breast bare.

After dinner Pralad walked back with his friend Raghunath to the little study they shared together. They walked bare-headed in the sun, hand in hand, two slim young figures. The folds of their *dhotis* fell in lines of Attic grace. Their sandals scrunched upon the gravel of the quadrangle.

The College buildings had been erected in the heyday of the Gothic revival and were a line of mean grey barracks adorned with occasional spires, pointed doorways, perpendicular windows. Rising amid this mass of frowsty sobriety the College chapel struck a discord of barbaric violence. It was a shrine dedicated to Shiva. A dazzling white lotus upon a dome of crude saffron ; and over it fluttered the *bhagwa zhenda*, the amber banner of the Marathas, the God-holy oriflamme of their race, the symbol of their patron-goddess.

“What did Joshi want you for this morning ?” Raghunath asked.

“Oh, nothing in particular. He asked me up



to his room and talked vaguely. About England chiefly.”

They came to their study. It was a small room with two iron beds, a bookshelf and one deck-chair. This last was reserved for honoured guests, for parents or masters, and was usually folded back and tilted against the wall. While Raghunath and Pralad squatted on the floor, leaning back against cushions propped along the wall.

“ I feel lazy this afternoon,” Pralad said as he flung open the door. “ Thank God, I’m not down to play cricket.”

“ I’m supposed to be bowling at the nets, but I think I’ll cut it. We might go down to the city presently.”

“ Yes, and have tea with Hari,” for Hari was a day boy, a friend of theirs, whose father had a big house in the old town.

Pralad squatted on his bed. There was a bamboo flute lying on the desk. He stretched out his arm, took the flute and began to play the famous *Bhairavi* from the opera “ Ekatch pyala ”. Raghunath hummed the tune, beating time with his hand upon the wall. “ I love that *Bhairavi*,” he cried when Pralad paused, and began to shake out the spittle from his flute.

“ So do I. I wonder when they’ll play ‘ Ekatch pyala ’ at the theatre again.”

“ Not till the Bal Gandharva Company comes back. No other company is half so good. No



one will go to see any play that Bal Gandharva has once sung in, unless he's in it."

"He's marvellous, isn't he?" sighed Pralad. "At first I couldn't understand what people saw in him. A fat old man dressed up in transparent saris, wriggling and smiling. But you forget all that when he sings. You begin to think him the most exquisite creature in the world."

"And of course his saris are exquisite. He sets the fashion in women's dress for the society women in Poona. He's always getting letters from princesses asking him where he buys his jewellery and his sandals, how he does his hair just that way with a coronet of champak-flowers."

"Some of the touring companies have girls playing women's parts nowadays."

"Bah, that's only in imitation of the West . . ."

"Let's go out now."

There was a picture of Krishna nailed to the wall by the door, and as they went out Raghunath lifted his hands in homage.

Pralad had a bicycle and stood on the mounting step.

The father of their day-boy friend Hari was a wealthy contractor. He was old now and lived on the interest of his earnings. He had three wives and an enormous number of children, some of whom he hardly knew by sight. Hari's friends used to tease him, "Have you met your father? Oh you must, he's a dear old man. We'll introduce you to him one day." And once



when he was leading Pralad and Raghunath up to his room they passed the old man on the stairs, and Pralad said quite loud, "Now, here's someone you don't know. Would you care to meet him?" The old man blinked suspiciously at the three boys, probably wondering which of them was his son, that scamp Hari, of whom the servants were always complaining to him. Hari's dark little face puckered up into a grimace of laughter and burying his face in the fold of his *dhoti* he ran on upstairs. Raghunath came last, tall and handsome and sombre, and the old man evidently thought him the only responsible member of the trio, for he shook his finger at him and said, "Don't you make too much noise upstairs, please. I can sometimes hear Hari laughing when I'm in the chapel and it disturbs me, and I don't know what the neighbours must think, all that cackling going on in a respectable Brahman's house."

Hari had a room to himself at the top of the house. There was a beautiful carpet on the floor and they kicked off their sandals at its edge. Hari was lying on his back on the floor reading when they came in. He sprang to his feet with a shout of pleasure.

"How lovely. I never expected you. I'll make some tea, shall I?"

"It's what we came for."

Hari went to a cupboard in the wall and taking out the tea-things set them on a brass tray which



he laid on the floor. Pralad went over to the window. The city was spread out at his feet. Over there rose Parvati Hill, crowned by a white temple with a golden dome. From its walls the last Peshwa had watched his troops falter and crumble away under the fire of the British. To the left was an open courtyard. Clothes were hanging to dry on a sagging line. There was an altar with a sprig of holy basil planted in the centre ; and stones smeared with scarlet paint set round to mark the sanctity of the spot or to record prayers that had been granted.

Raghunath came and stood by Pralad, putting his arm round his friend's neck. When Hari had put the kettle on he joined them. "What are you two staring at?"

"Nothing . . . you can see the Saturday Palace quite clearly," and Pralad pointed out the huge brown mass of distant ruins that had once been the seat of the Maratha Government.

"You must have seen that often before. I'm sure you're looking at something else. Oho, I thought so. The new sweeper-woman. I've noticed her before. Pretty, isn't she? It's a good thing my father's so blind. He'd never engage a serving-woman if he knew she were pretty. All the neighbours would talk." They laughed and then Hari added, "Why, look, the kettle's boiling already."

"You make wonderful tea," said Raghunath a moment later.



Hari's puckish little face grinned with pleasure. "I expect it's the milk, really. We keep our own she-buffaloes, as you know, and always see that they have plenty of grass. Most of the buffaloes here are fed on dry stubble except in the monsoon."

Somewhere in the city a band struck up. It played a queer snaky little tune that died away in trembling quartertones.

"What's that?" cried Pralad. "Why, it's the Moharram tune."

"Yes, it's Moharram to-morrow."

"Good, a half-holiday."

Festivals, both Hindu and Mussulmans, played a great part in their lives. There was the Makar Sankrant when they gave each other presents of sweetmeats. And there was Shimga, the Hindu Saturnalia, when every licence was sanctioned by tradition; when bands of youths, drunk with *bhang*, wandered about the city, splashing the passers-by with coloured water, singing indecent songs, making indecent gestures; papers, only published on that one day and devoted to the most desperate pornography, were hawked in the streets; and all night long under the glaring street-lamps the revellers sang and reeled, their faces masked with dust, their clothes grotesquely dyed. . . . But best of all was Divali, the Feast of Lamps.

Divali . . . They were going home next day for the holidays. The first breath of winter was



in the air, the dry delicious cool of the Indian winter. Raghunath and Pralad sat in their study reading by the light of a smoky oil-lamp. Through the open window came faint fronds of mist. The street-lamps in the road outside were blurred and dim, and the pavements glistened moist. Bicycle-bells jangled, cab-drivers sang out warnings in melancholy tones, and far in the distance the flutes of a temple shrilled piercingly, high and thin as the call of a sea-bird.

“Last night of the term,” said Raghunath in a voice of deep contentment, throwing back his head and brushing his long hair from his face. He was spending the first week or two of the holidays with Pralad. It was nice to look forward to the comfort and dignity of a Sardar’s house, but he was a little nervous at the thought of meeting Dada Saheb ; his own father had been a hard-working and moderately successful clerk.

They were up early next morning. Long red buses purred in the milky dawn at the College gateway. Pralad and Raghunath found seats in a bus and heaved their trunks on to the roof. Hari had come to see them off. “Till next term,” they called out to each other ; and the bus moved forward, rattled through the narrow streets, and came out into the pale morning air beyond the city’s murk.

At noon they came to a large village, half-way between Poona and Ramgad. The bus stopped and all the passengers got out to stretch their legs.



The village policeman put on his red turban, gave a hurried glance at his pocket-mirror and came forward to gossip with the driver.

There was a restaurant with a long wooden table on trestles in the shade of an awning. Pralad and Raghunath sat down and ordered lemonade. They had their lunch with them, boiled rice in a small round tin and a jar of milk. "We have some *bajas* just ready in the kitchen," urged the proprietor. "Hot spicy *bajas*. My daughter made them with her own hands. You won't reach Ramgad till evening. Wouldn't your honours like to sample the *bajas*?" They agreed and the crinkly brown potato-cakes were brought out sizzling on a brass platter.

When they had finished their meal they walked round the village. It was empty at that hour as most of the men were away working in the fields. You saw an occasional skinny silhouette against the skyline, bent double, struggling with the bare, inhospitable land. There was a post-office and the Brahman postmaster dozed on the doorstep, his bald head nodding gently. His children played silently in the dust, naked pale Brahman children with yellow eyes and long oval heads and a heavy silver girdle slanting from hip to hip. At the boundary of the village under a silvery pipal-tree was a shrine to the Monkey-God. The marigolds and roses scattered along the lip of the shrine were faded and brown and the lamps had gutted out. Presently the driver sounded his



horn and Pralad and Raghunath hurried back to the bus.

It was evening when they reached Ramgad. A cool wind was blowing from the hills. The old fort hung like a thundercloud above the town, and temples and houses swam in a sea of eddying mist. There were lights at all the windows, for at the Feast of Lamps you celebrate the triumphant return of Rama from Ceylon. Little clay castles adorned with toy figures of Kings and Queens stood by the doorways, lit from within by coloured candles. Children ran whooping and laughing in the streets. Everyone seemed happy and gay, shouting greetings and exchanging blessings. And then the bus drew up before Pralad's house. And there was Dada Saheb standing in the door, his face alight with happiness, and Sushila craning from a window.

"And then when did you become an anchorite?" Bhimi asked.

"Oh, long afterwards. When I was at College I wasn't interested in religion at all. And once or twice I went down to stay with cousins in Bombay who were very anglicised and I played tennis and went picnics. But I was never really attracted by the West. I remember feeling an increasing irritation with the English Professor Joshi who did nothing but talk about the marvels of English literature and if I spoke of our own Marathi poets he would sniff and mutter something about mythology or superstition and advise



me to read Herbert Spencer and Grant Allen. But already, though their religious transports did not touch me, I could feel the passion in the verses of Tukaram and Ramdas. I remember a couplet of Tukaram's, ' O Father, O Sea of Wisdom, faith and love are the vessels that bear the faithful across the stream of life ', that stirred me more than anything I had yet read. The words were like a magic incantation with power to ring the heart and awaken tears of emotion . . .

" I did well at College and passed the exam. for the Imperial Police, and then my marriage was decided on. And only a few weeks before the day of my wedding the revelation came to me. You remember my telling you how in spite of my disbelief in the gods yet I could never dare to ignore the little shrine of the Mother outside our town ? "

Bhimi nodded and thought of her own terror of the Goddess whenever she saw that white boxlike temple on the bare uplands of her home.

" One day when I was out walking alone I came upon a *sadhu* cross-legged under a tree. He was terribly emaciated, rigid in a trance. His hair was piled in a vast cone on his head and smeared with ashes. I stood for a moment gazing at him, wondering at the strangeness of that life ; thinking how far removed from the modern world and my own life and thoughts were those old backward-regarding Hindu cults. And then suddenly the *sadhu* awoke and his eyes, enormous, pale as milk, were fixed on mine. He called me three



times by my name. Almost without understanding what I did I went and knelt before him. There was something terribly compelling about those huge transparent eyes, the gong-note of his voice.

“ ‘The Mother is calling you,’ the *sadhu* said. ‘From her shrine in Nilkeshwar she calls you.’

“ Then he closed his eyes ; and all expression died out of his face and it was set once more like a death-mask. I can’t convey to you by any words and phrases that I know of the extraordinary impression his words had made on me. It seemed to me that without realising it I had for a long while been awaiting some such message ; every moment of boredom, depression or restlessness, every sense of frustration and futility (and when one is young one has many) seemed now but premonitions of a weariness for the whole world of flesh and an overmastering longing for escape. Escape ! That was the word that recurred to me again and again. It seemed the resolution of everything. Just like a skilful player on the *dalruba* will bewilder his audience with the subtlety of his variations and then, after a mounting climax, resolve all the mazy strands of his music with one tremendous chord . . . I had never heard of Nilkeshwar. But now I knew that I should not have any rest night or day till I had found it. I sent no word to my home or my parents or friends but set out straight to find that place where the Goddess was calling me. I can



see now the long white roads stretching endlessly before me, the inevitable banyan-trees on either side ; a company of grey monkeys squatting on a bridge and watching me pass ; the vast plains, empty, shadowless ; an occasional cart laden with rustling sugar-cane, the driver nodding in the noon heat. I begged my food like any wandering cenobite and seldom slept hungry ; and at each stage of my journey I asked my way, at first meeting many a head-shake or blank stare, but presently when I neared the place finding many people whose faces lit up at the word and who directed me eagerly. And then one morning I noticed the name Nilkeshwar written clearly on the dusty milestones. The miles decreased ; I was coming to the end of my journey. I couldn't rest at all that day, nor wait anywhere to quench my thirst. As evening approached I felt my heart beating like a gong and my breath came in stabbing gasps. I began to run, panting like a spent animal, and I could feel a cold line of froth along my lips. And at twilight I reached the village and saw a vast temple overlooking a river. I stood in the doorway and from afar saw the Goddess in the inner shrine. The last rays of the sun fell on her. A black basalt figure robed in Benares silks danced on the prostrate body of Shiva. She had four arms ; with her two left hands she offered a sword and a severed head, for she is death ; but with her two right hands she beckoned lovingly,



for she is life. I went in and sat down against a pillar. I felt that I had come home."

For a long while he worked as a menial in the temple, happy to be of service to the Mother in however humble a capacity. He slept in the long colonnade along the central courtyard with a company of beggars and pilgrims and old people who had come there to die. Before dawn he awoke, prayed quietly, his face in his hands, and then taking a brass bowl went down to the river for his ablutions. Before the temple walls a fresher breeze blew in his face. In the east the sky was ashen. Along the river-bank in the little shrines a few candles still flickered uncertainly, a few reed lights still shone palely on the tall lamp-rests of black stone. He had never felt so happy and so free ; and when the chill of the water reached his thighs and he splashed his face and wet his hair he could have laughed aloud for joy of living. When he returned, stepping lightly over the firm moist sand, the mass of the temple was discernible in outline against the paling sky. A few priests were astir, walking barefoot across the grey stone flags of the courtyard, their white clothes aglitter in the dawn-murk. Pralad took a brush and began to sweep, singing happily to himself. No one spoke to him, or noticed him. Occasionally some priest cast an incurious glance upon the new-comer, but the pale drugged eyes soon moved away or were veiled under heavy lids.



The service of the temple continued an unvarying routine. As soon as dawn broke peals of little bells chimed, lights were swung before the eyes of the Mother to awake her, and in the *naubat-khana* over the main gateway flutes played the dawn-hymn to the accompaniment of cymbals, drums and gongs. The young priests went into the temple garden to gather jasmine and champak and tuberose to weave a garland for the Goddess's adornment. At nine were performed the main *sandhyas*, worship of the Sun and sprinkling of lustral water, and the Mother went in procession round the temple to the notes of martial music. Returned to the darkness of her shrine the Goddess was hungry and platters of rice and butter and sweatmeats were placed before her. At noon she was escorted to her silver bed to sleep through the heat of the day, and flutes played softly to lull her through the noon. She awoke towards evening. At twilight a service was held in the glitter of brandished torches. Conches blew and little bells tinkled until a blare of trumpets announced the hour of the Mother's repose.

When after many months' probation (when the apparently self-absorbed and entranced priests had noted with approval the novice's assiduity in prayer and service) Pralad was associated with all the intimate acts of the temple ritual. Like a courtier at a king's levée he attended the Goddess at her dawn-rising, he gathered flowers



for her, wove the garland and wound it about her neck. He walked beside her palanquin in the procession, he escorted her to her silver couch. Reverently he lifted the gorgeous robes that she doffed at night, and with an outpouring of devotion he held the silver-fringed umbrella of vermilion silk over her head when she came forth from her shrine.

“Were you no longer frightened of the Goddess?”

“At first I was. I had only to look at that figure dancing on the prostrate form of Shiva to feel a spasm of fear. This passed away in time but I was not fully purged of fear till one night when I had a strange dream. Or perhaps not a dream at all. It was so vivid that I often think it must have really happened. I seemed to rise from the place where I always slept in the colonnade and I went out into the temple garden. I could just see my way, for there was a sickle moon low above the tamarind-tree. The air was heavy with the scent of night-blooming flowers. I sat down under a champak-tree. Presently I realised that I was not alone in the garden. There was a tall dark figure moving steadily to and fro between the flower-beds. It came out into the moonlight and facing me I saw the Goddess, a tall column of black basalt with white eyes. I felt no fear, only an intense wonder. She came slowly towards me, walking stiffly like an idol come to life. Then, when only a few



feet away from me, she turned and instead of the back that, from my ceremonial duties in the shrine, I knew so well, her back had the likeness of the face and form of Shiva. So then in a flash of understanding I knew that Kali and Shiva are one ; that the terrible figure dancing on her prostrate lord was but one aspect of divinity, just as the still and shrunken form under her feet was another such aspect.

“ That was the first step in my initiation. After that I had many dreams and often while sitting on the steps before the shrine would fall into an ecstasy even at noon. In one such dream I saw hanging in the air above me a sword. There came to me though that it was with the gift of such a sword that the Goddess inspired Shivaji to expel the Mussulman. And thinking of Shivaji I fell into despair at my own imperfections. I realised I was little better than the Mussulmans whom the divine hero-king drove out. The sword swung lower and lower. With a wild cry I leapt up and bared my throat to the blade. And at that moment, the temple, the shrine, the garden, the river, the whole sensible world crumpled and melted away like the reflection in a pool shattered by a flung stone. Nothing on earth existed any more, only the sea, an illimitable ocean on which I spun like a leaf. The waves rose over me, menacing, dark-veined, tipped with gleaming foam. In the trough I was drawn down and down, the waves broke



over me, and I sank. In the far depths there was only silence and the dark. But even in that last moment of horror I became suddenly aware of the Mother. It is only in such utter remoteness that she has her being, only in such darkness is visible, only in such silence speaks."

Bhimi began to question him.

"No, little sister, that is not the end. It is only the first stage ; the stage of understanding the identity of the Mother with the material world. But the final stage (which I have not yet reached myself and to attain to which I wander as a pilgrim all over India) is to know that even the Mother herself has no existence and is but a phantasm obscuring reality ; for the ultimate God is utterly formless and unknowable. When I have attained that goal I shall have to destroy the dear image of the Goddess in my heart. Only thus can I escape from this world of illusion and enter the world of *Samadhi*, the Absolute, where all existence, all energy, all knowledge are at last at rest."

Bhimi listened with shining eyes. It was wonderful, a new dream-world for her to wander in. It was like the stories her mother used to tell her when she was a child, tales of anchorites who rode upon tigers and saints who scourged themselves with cobras. Often she didn't understand Pralad's expressions and phrases, but as he talked a warm feeling of mysterious wonder



gathered about her heart. She could have cried with happiness when he told her of his ecstatic unions with the Goddess, who in dreams caught him to her with encircling arms and intoxicated him with the perfume of her hair.

“ Shall I ever have visions like that ? ” she asked naïvely.

Pralad smiled. “ It is for you to say, little sister. But do not worry yourself. You will find the Mother in the end, though you may have to wait many hundreds of lives.”

They sat silent a while. From the well, which now gaped wide and deep, came the thud of Suka's pick, and the rattle of dry earth on the spade. Pilgrims to the hill-temple of the Goddess came, stopped to read the notice Pralad had hung on the tree, threw down a few coins and went on their way.

Evening came and Suka and his friend shouldered their picks and came over to where Pralad and Bhimi sat.

“ Afraid we haven't struck water yet,” Suka said.

“ You will, you will.” Pralad nodded. Suka squatted down, and taking a pan-leaf from his turban began to chew contentedly.

“ Do you never want to go back to your home ? ” Bhimi asked Pralad.

“ Never. The thought never even comes to me. All that life seems infinitely remote. When I remember it the scenes recur, but often I find



it hard to believe that it is the same I who moves through my memories.”

Presently Suka yawned and got up to stretch himself. “ Well, I suppose we’d better be getting along. It’s getting late and I’m hungry.”

They left Pralad cross-legged under his umbrella. Bhimi looked back and saw that his eyes were already closed, his body stiff and rigid. In the sad evening light he seemed an image carved of yellow stone.

Meanwhile, the pit that Suka and his friend were digging for the well began to yawn enormous. They enlisted other workers, and their activity never failed to attract the attention of the passers-by, who stood about the lip of the pit watching the men at work. One morning they found a dark stain at the bottom of the pit, and looking closer they found the earth was moist and they knew that they had at last come upon water ; a little more earth was dug out and the water bubbled up. They ran excitedly to tell Pralad, but he merely nodded with a dreamy smile. Already he seemed to have lost interest in his well ; water had been found as he foretold and his concern with it grew faint. Towards evening he sank into a stupor and did not open his eyes even to wish good night to his workers. The next morning as they came up the steep hill-path they saw him from a distance still rigid under his umbrella ; and beside him sat a large grey monkey who seemed to be whispering in his



ear. It had vanished by the time they reached Pralad ; but he never stirred at their approach. The well was now half-full of water. " Perhaps we should get a mason to make proper walls for the well," one man said. They waited to offer this suggestion to Pralad, but he never stirred all day. They sat about smoking and talking in low whispers and towards evening returned to the city. One of them, looking back, called to the others. Then they saw that the great grey monkey had returned and, once more sitting beside Pralad, was whispering in his ear. Next day Pralad had gone.

" I suppose the Goddess called him," Bhimi said.

Suka looked at her curiously but said nothing. They were standing by the well. The water was dark and sluggish. Suka struggled down and lifted a handful to his mouth and then made a wry face. " It's not very sweet." Bhimi remembered a saying of Pralad's, " Bitter are the gifts of the Mother. . . ." " Well, that job's finished, anyway," Suka said. " But we didn't do so badly while it lasted," for Pralad had always distributed to the workmen all the alms of the passers-by except a few coppers for his own food. " We needn't worry yet awhile."

Finally he decided to learn to be a motor-driver. He worked in a garage for no pay, and in return was taught how to drive and how to repair a car. After two or three months he got



a licence from the police and was engaged by a bus company. He had to buy himself a uniform and he borrowed the money for that from a Pathan moneylender living in the same *chawl* on the landing below. A grizzled old man, who lent small sums to working-men at exorbitant interest and never needed to go to the law courts to recover his money, for he waited on his clients in person with an iron-shod club. Suka had become friendly with him, for, except to defaulting creditors, he was a gentle old man and of charming manners. He had been in the army and his pension had been the original capital of his money-lending business. He had come south, accompanied like all Pathans by a young lad, and when the latter had died in Tryambuc some sentiment had attached him to the place. Now his only pleasure was in the training of fighting-partridges. Wherever he went he always had in one hand a cage with two partridges chirruping and squawking. Every evening he took his partridges out to the open country beyond the town and let them out of their cages. The plump little brown birds ran about pecking at the ground for insects and occasionally lifting their heads to squawk defiance at some wild partridges calling from the shadow of the thorn-bushes half-way up the hills. Sometimes he used his tamest birds as decoys for wild partridges, the bevy luring amorous strangers back into a cage. When it became dark he called "Aa !



Aa ! Aa ! ” and the partridges came hurrying back to him and filed obediently into their cages ; then he went back slowly to the city.

He liked and trusted Suka and let him have the money without demur. So Suka had a fine uniform made for himself by the best tailor in the town ; khaki cloth, a tight coat with pockets and bright silver-shining buttons. He tried it on, pirouetted in front of Bhimi, who smoothed down the back of the coat, asked if it didn't feel tight across the shoulders, or if the waist weren't too loose, and wondered how he would be able to bear those narrow chimney-like trousers and the hard English shoes. Suka then tried a khaki turban and felt as grand as a rajah.

He was infinitely happy in his new life. He liked the other drivers, all young bloods of the town, and he enjoyed the feeling of responsibility and the opportunity to order the bus-passengers about and give officious directions and haggle over the fare and receive occasional tips for transgressing the police regulations in the matter of the number of passengers or the weight of luggage on the roof. He made many friends and was often in the cafés with other drivers and sometimes even a sepoy or two.

Bhimi was delighted that Suka seemed so absorbed in his work, so happy and confident. But it was sad that she saw so little of him now. He came in at odd hours for meals, sometimes turning up at midnight for supper ; and he



always had some excuse that he had been put on extra work owing to some other driver's illness or had been set to do some repairing work in the Company's garages.

"But it's rather a shame they always pick on you for the extra work."

"Not always on me. Everyone has to do his share of overtime. What would the other fellows think if I shirked late hours and left it to them? Besides I want to keep in the good books of the manager."

"Yes." Bhimi saw the force of that. Still it was such a pity he couldn't get back earlier so that they could spend the evening together like they used to. They had always had so much to talk about, and now Suka just stumbled into their room, said he was hungry and was dinner ready, and then fell asleep soon after—which of course was only natural after his having to work such late hours. But it made it hard for Bhimi to prepare a really nice supper for him. Things spoilt so easily if you just left them and it was difficult to keep curries properly warm; you put them near the fire and either they went all dry and smoke-tainted or else the fire burnt low without your noticing and the curry had gone cold and stiff. She spent much time in keeping their room clean and in polishing her brass pots and pans, of which she was very proud. But it was sad that Suka no longer noticed how bright and clean the room looked; he had always



formerly given a sigh of contentment as soon as he came in and closed the door quietly behind him ; but now he was too tired (she supposed) to notice anything.

Presently she had to admit to herself that he often came home smelling strongly of toddy, the strong palm-liquor. Once he was very sick and she reproached him. "Well, all the other fellows drink it," he said ; "you feel so tired after a day's work that toddy is the only thing that pulls you together again." And then, irritation rising at her insistence, he added, "And you're a fine one to talk about not drinking, considering the way your respected father used to drink, and all the time talking big about being Patil of the village."

Bhimi began to cry. It was their first disagreement and she reproached herself bitterly for having spoken to him while he still felt ill and wretched after vomiting.

"I'm sorry. Forgive me," she implored.

"Aeh. That's all right. But you shouldn't keep worrying a fellow the way you do—why can't you be back earlier, why do you drink, where d'you go with your friends . . . ?"

"Yes, yes. I know. I'm a little fool. But I love you so I always want to know everything about you ; and I don't mean to worry you—I know how tired you must be. . . . And then, you see, I'm not very well myself."

He turned over and looked up at her, his brow



furrowed. "You look all right. What's the matter?"

She told him that she thought she was going to have a child. He stared at her for a moment and then his face broke into a boyish smile of pure happiness.

"Bhimi! Is that true?"

She nodded.

He seized one of her hands and began kissing it. "Oh, why didn't you tell me before? It's wonderful, isn't it? Our own child." He looked up into her face, his eyes like stars. She snuggled down beside him, laid her hand on his shoulder.

"It'll be a boy, of course," he said.

"Yes, I'd like a boy. I hope he'll be like you."

"What'll we do with him when he grows up?"

"I think he ought to go to a good school, don't you? Wouldn't it be grand if he were educated and got a fine post in some Bombay firm?"

"It would be heaven. What fun it'll be seeing him grow up. Oh, I do hope it'll be a boy."

"Of course it will. . . ."

They talked on far into the night. And before turning over to sleep Suka kissed her very tenderly, and her dreams were full of joy.

Now for a few weeks Suka came home early



from his work and they would go for a quiet walk in the cool of the evening. Often they talked of the child. Bhimi pictured herself taking it out in her arms and laying it upon a grassy bank outside the city ; it would laugh up at the sky, kick its legs and chortle, and then rolling over on its stomach pluck with tiny hands at the wild flowers in the grass.

“ And then he’ll learn to walk. Can’t you just see him making his first few steps and then tumbling——”

“ But I’d be in time to catch him,” she said quickly.

“ But even if he did fall he wouldn’t cry. He’ll be a real Maratha, you’ll see.”

Bhimi began to feel a new importance. She took thought over her food, pursed up her lips and wondered whether she ought to eat less meat, and whether tea wasn’t rather unwise. She often ran down to consult the old Gujarati widow when they had first met in the dharamsala and who, having recommended them to this *chawl*, had followed them herself and taken a little room on the ground floor. She was delighted to advise Bhimi and from the store of her memory discovered an infinite number of traditional superstitions. “ You should wear a necklace of *arani* berries or your child will have weak eyes. If you hear the screech of an owl you should disrobe completely and tie and untie seven knots in a piece of string—otherwise the child may be born



deaf. On Saturdays you should wear a black dress or the planet Saturn may look unfavourably upon the child at the time of his birth."

She told her of the various ceremonies for securing the favour of Kali. In honour of her Bhimi painted seven round spots with red lac on each wall of her room, and poured melted butter over them so as to form five small streams. A mixture of molasses and butter had then to be applied to these spots with a piece of red cotton yarn.

"Then you should have a little image of the Goddess in the room," and when Bhimi asked her how she could get such an image the old widow brought her a coconut which she had besmeared with chalk, with two eyes and a nose painted on it in red. She set the coconut on a stool, leaning upright against the wall, and then draped the stool with a silk shawl of her own. It was rather a frightening little figure; and it did recall the images of the Goddess one saw in her temples; squat and menacing. Bhimi kept a lamp burning all night before it, and sang songs that the Gujarati widow taught her.

Suka grumbled at the transformation of their little room into a sort of chapel. "If you want to worship the Goddess, you can go to the temple."

"Yes, but it's so important to win her favour—especially now—and it's my first child. I do so want him to be a boy that you'll be proud of."



He patted her shoulder. "Don't you worry about that. Everything'll be fine."

She thought he was satisfied and turned with fresh ardour to new propitiatory ceremonies. She went to the temple and with a gift of money persuaded seven holy Brahmans to grant her the privilege of *sharanamrit*. She washed their feet with milk and then drank the milk, thus acquiring a portion, however small, of Brahmanic merit. Next she took offerings of rice, sugar and curds to an exorcist who promised to perform magic rites which would secure her from the malevolence of ghosts and demons when she was in the weakness and agony of childbirth.

But if she had but realised it Suka grew increasingly irritated at her absorption in these rites. He didn't like having the Gujarati widow always in and out of his room. Widows are unlucky anyway, and this one had a sad and cheerless face that depressed you as soon as you saw it. And she was always croaking away about possible misfortunes and disasters that could only be avoided by this ceremony or that sacrifice. And once when he came back tired from work and was met by the widow-woman at the door, her forefinger on her lips, he pushed past her roughly and found an old Brahman from the Kali Temple squatting in state on a stool covered with green cloth.

He waited, glowering, till the Brahman and the widow had gone and then turned on Bhimi.



"Sometimes it's difficult for one to remember that this is my room. Anyone and everyone seems to spend their time popping in and out of it."

"You shouldn't talk like that," Bhimi pouted. "That was a very holy Brahman, an expert in magic, and we were performing the ceremony."

And then Suka's supper wasn't ready, so they had another quarrel over that. "You take far more interest in your damned Brahman friends than you do in me. Here I come in tired and hungry and all I find is——"

"Oh, Suka, really and truly I'm sorry. The Brahman stayed longer than I thought, and you were early home. And it's never happened before—your supper not being ready for you."

"Well, I should hope not. You've got nothing else to do all day except get it ready. But instead of that you spend your time gossiping with that croaking old widow. That's not much fun for a man, to come back from his work and find that old witch hanging about by the door. I tell you I'm sick of it. Sick of it, d'you hear?"

She began to cry, but he was keyed up to a pitch of irritation and went on grumbling till finally her temper gave way. "You only seem to think about your supper. Can't you spare a moment's thought for your child? You don't imagine I do all these ceremonies for my own amusement, do you? I'm doing them for the



sake of us and our child. And all you can do is to grumble, grumble.”

W: “Oh, all right. Have it your own way. But don’t expect me to be in a hurry to come back to a roomful of Brahmans and widows.”

Bhimi wouldn’t give way and for the next few days Suka sulked, came home late and ate his supper without a word. Bhimi was grieved, and yet afraid to break off her devotion to the Goddess, or admit that she had been wrong. Her heart ached to see Suka’s hard set face in the lamplight ; but when she looked across the room she saw the white eyes of her little coconut image of the Goddess fixed on her, as if warning her that this was a test. She consulted the widow, who pursed her lips and shook her head and talked about men being like that. “Of course one mustn’t say a word against one’s husband—no Hindu woman would dream of doing such a thing—still a wife has to put up with a lot. Eh, I remember my husband—well, perhaps I shouldn’t tell you—that’ll all come in time, too. Well, it’s all fated, that’s what I say. You’re born a woman and there you are. What else you can hope for,” and she rambled on dismally, and then remembered it was time for her morning visit to the Kali Temple. Bhimi went with her, and noticed as always a strange thrill how the old woman’s face changed as soon as they went in under the gateway of the temple. The frowns and wrinkles seemed to be smoothed



away, and her face shone with a child-like happiness as she gazed up at the towering mass of the shrine. There were always beggars squatting just inside the gateway and to them the old widow always gave a few brown coins. "I soon shan't have any left for myself," she always murmured ; "but while I have anything and they have nothing I must give what little I can."

At this hour, just before noon, the temple precincts were always crowded, the long corridors echoing with voices and deep gong-notes and the cries of children. All round the outer walls were little chapels dedicated to various Gods, the prancing red-daubed Monkey-God or the white phallics of Shiva. Lamps wavered in dark niches before ivory statuettes of Krishna the flute-player. A huge red phallus of Khandoba was wreathed with a garland of yellow roses. There was a smell of flowers everywhere, jasmine and champak and mango-blossom ; and an acrid smell of decay where the flowers of discarded garlands rotted underfoot ; and at one end of the courtyard a frightful odour from an old well half-full of stagnant water that was coated with green slime and the sweepings of the courtyard floor.

Bhimi and the widow each purchased a coconut and a handful of rose-petals from the pedlars who sat cross-legged about the steps of the inner shrine ; and they broke the coconut on the



shrine's silver-leafed threshold and laid the rose-petals in the brass tray that lay at the feet of the Goddess. With hands clasped under their chins they stood for a moment adoring the image, the dark mask glinting in the candlelight, the stiff triangle of gorgeous robes. They in turn reached up and rang the great bronze bell to awaken the Mother and each murmured her requests, Bhimi as always praying for a manchild.

When they came out of the gloom of the shrine the sunlight seemed dazzling.

They sat for a while on the steps and then Bhimi said, "I must go to the bazaar. It closes soon after midday and I haven't bought any vegetables for Suka's supper."

As soon as they left the temple her calm and serenity deserted the widow-woman and she clutched Bhimi's arm with sharp-nailed fingers and began whining about the traffic, and the way the boys on bicycles rang their bells just behind you to make you jump, and the children playing in streets bumped into you and never apologised. "*You* should be careful when you go in the streets, my dear ; any little shock, you know . . ."

They passed a little crowd gathered round a speaker, and stopped to hear what he was talking about. He was white-capped, a Congressman. "What's he say, my dear ? Tell me what he says." Bhimi stood on tiptoe and craning forward caught a few words. "He seems to be

talking about temple entry—saying that we should admit the untouchables into the temples.”

“ Well, whatever next ? Untouchables in the temples ! ”

“ I’ve heard one or two people talking about that. Seems a funny idea. But the Brahmans will never allow it.”

“ And indeed I should hope not. I really don’t know what the world’s coming to.”

Bhimi told her how when the untouchables in her hill-village had become troublesome the Marathas had set on them and given them a drubbing, and the old woman chuckled. “ That’s the way to treat them. The only way. They wouldn’t be where they are if they hadn’t committed some pretty bad sins in a previous life. But goodness, if my husband had been alive and had heard this sort of nonsense about untouchables coming into the temples he’d have had a fit. Wah ! I never heard of such a thing.”

A loud hooting made them draw in to the side of the road and a great lorry jolted down the street. Its windows were veiled with the yellow silk curtains and the door at the back tightly shuttered.

“ D’you see that ? ” the widow-woman asked.

“ Yes.”

“ It’s Ahalya-Bai’s motor.”

“ Who’s she ? ”

“ Haven’t you heard of her ? ”



“No.”

“She’s the widow of the Raja Bahadur, but she’s become a sort of High Priestess to the Kali Temple. They say that every Friday the Goddess takes possession of her, and the priests crown her and put upon her the robes of the Goddess and worship her.”

“But does she really become the Goddess?” Bhimi asked, wide-eyed.

“I don’t know. Some say one thing, some another. But many people believe in her. They say she can grant any request. They say she grows taller than human when she sits on her throne, and I’ve heard many people tell how when you have seen her face in a trance you can’t but believe that the Goddess has taken possession of her body.”

“But where can one see her?”

“Every Friday in her palace.”

“You haven’t been?”

“No, I always mean to, and then forget. Her palace is a long way off, and the Kali Temple is near. I know I’m in the presence of the Mother in the temple, why should I go farther afield?”

Bhimi saw that. But it was very exciting to think of a woman being possessed by Kali. She began to talk of it to Suka that evening. But he interrupted her. “Oh, you and your Goddess. I’m sick of hearing about it.”

They sat silent for a while, and then Suka



repented a little and told her of a film he had seen at the cinema, a wonderful story all about a Prince who became an anchorite devoted to the ascetic cult of Shiva, and how his stepmother, who was a witch, had tried in vain to tempt him with regiments of dancing-women. He told her how lovely the dancing-women were, how wonderfully they had danced and how exciting the music was. He hummed an air, beating time with his hands.

But Bhimi felt aggrieved. She had never heard him speak with such artless enthusiasm before. It's all because of my poor body now, she thought ; he finds me deformed and ugly. And drawing her hands down over her belly she had a pang of bitter envy of other women who were slim and straight. " But, oh, when at last he sees a manchild in his arms, then he'll understand. He'll be sorry he was ever rough and thoughtless with me." And in her heart she prayed once again to Kali to grant her this one request.

As Bhimi drew near the time of her delivery she became ill and listless, oppressed with strange fancies. She pressed Suka to spend more time at home, questioned him suspiciously, sulked and cried for the most trivial reasons. She knew she was alienating Suka ; she promised herself again and again not to worry him ; she lay awake at night crying over some silly thing she had said to wound him. And then even as she reproached



herself new suspicions began to drift through her mind. So late again—the cinema I suppose—but the way he talked about the dancing-girls he'd seen in that film, smacking his lips—ugh, disgusting. Never thinks of me. Oh, but I will be patient. If he's tiring of me it's my own fault, it's my bad temper and endless questionings. . . . And so the thoughts went round and round in her head like white mice in a cage.

She had guessed right, though ; Suka had gone again to the cinema. There was a restlessness in his blood. The feast of Holi, the Hindu Saturnalia, was approaching and some breath of its ritual hysteria was already stirring him. His friends talked to him of the exciting experiences they had had on earlier Holies—girls they had met—delicious encounters and romances of a single night. They sat in the cinema café after the show, drinking beer round a rickety iron table. Loud-speakers blared out dance-music from some Bombay hotel—the drums and tublas and guitars bucked softly at your heart. “Yes,” Suka's friends were saying. “In the Victoria Gardens you meet them. Behind the fountain in the bamboo grove. You don't even know their names. Everyone is mad. A few glasses of *bhang* and you don't care for anything or anyone. You feel that all that matters is this one night and yourself and a lover.”

In front of the houses little earthen ovens were built with a fire lit inside—the fires of Holi. It



was on this day that the mischievous God of Love, Kama, seeking new victims, came upon Shiva entranced in his ascetic swoon, enormous and emaciated, tall as the hills of Himalaya. Kama fitted to his bow of sugar-cane one of his sweet arrows, made of the stems of lotus and jasmine, and let fly. Shiva, in a fury at this disturbance of his meditation, opened the terrible third eye that burns in the middle of his forehead, and with a single flaming glance of it consumed the luckless Kama. But though he has no form or shape, and no images are raised to him in any temple, the God of Love lives on eternally, invisible and importunate. But it is in memory of that fatal day when he angered Shiva that people light the fires of Holi every year. Boys were soon about the streets splashing coloured water over everyone. They splashed Suka's uniform as he came back from work. For a moment he was annoyed—his nice uniform that had cost so much and which he prided himself on keeping so clean. And then a gust of reckless excitement caught him, he snatched a bucket of coloured water from one of the boys and ran laughing down the street splashing everyone he met. Some friends saw him and called out to him from a café. They each had a bowl of *bhang* in front of them. "Come on, join us, Suka," they cried. They stood up and lifted a bowl to his lips; he drank it, great gulps, the sweet white liquid, and felt its flame leap



through his veins. "Ah!" he gasped, turning aside his head. "No, no—you must have some more," they urged.

More bowls were brought and then miraculously they were empty. Suka was leaning his head on the shoulder of one man next him, laughing weakly. Someone was thumping the table declaiming verses of erotic poetry, and each time he uttered an obscene word everyone cheered and laughed. The café was full of revellers, their clothes splashed with every imaginable colour, their faces covered with green and purple finger-marks. With arms linked a party of youths rocked backwards and forwards in the intoxication of some drinking-song. A fat old man, his shirt torn to ribbons, stood swaying in the door, beating time with his arms. A cow with a garland round her neck came in and began eating some candy-bales on the counter.

"I'm tired of this place," someone cried, and they all cheered and shouted and the next moment were in the street. There were crowds everywhere so that you could hardly move. Suka leant up against a friend. The lights of the shop swam and eddied round him like bright-plumaged birds. A basketful of roses was emptied from a window. Suka caught one as they fell and stuck it behind his ear.

"Where are we going?" he asked his friend.

"Anywhere. Anywhere. So long as we don't stop still."



This seemed to Suka an inconceivably droll reply and he rolled about laughing, rolled against a man in front who swung round and planted a red-daubed hand full in his face. For a moment Suka saw his face reflected in a shop window—funnier and funnier—to see your own face all covered with a great red handmark like that.

On the steps of the house a band sat playing under a canopy of plantain-leaves ; drummers, trumpeters, and a drunken Goanese trombone-player who played out of time and tune and whose puffed cheeks and face of serious determination made a ridiculous contrast to the maniac glee of the other players. When his cheeks were puffed to their utmost a small boy stole up and pushed his fist into the Goan's cheek so that it relaxed with a sudden pop. Everyone shrieked with laughter but the Goan looked round for a moment with shocked dignity, shrugged his shoulders, sighed, leant back against the step behind him and fell asleep. But the other players were undisturbed by his defection. How the drums rang and thudded ; it was deafening and deliciously intoxicating. Suka began jigging up and down in time to the music, clapping his hands and singing.

And then suddenly from, it seemed, a long way off, at first hardly noticed but slowly increasing and forcing its way into the crowd's consciousness, came the notes of a different music ; a slow



booming of goud-drums and the sullen moan of a gong. "What's that?" people asked, turning. There were torchlights flaring at the end of the street. A procession. Oh yes, of course, a procession. But those slow dome-like chords breaking in upon the merriment of Holi? The shouting and laughter died down, there was a murmur of disquiet, of questioning protest. They moved forward, asking each other, calling out to those in front. And round the bend of the street came a tall tower, tier on tier of painted wood, jolting unevenly over the cobbled street, and all round the amber flags of the Goddess flapped in the torchlight. Then they understood. "Shitala Mata!" they cried. "Small-pox Mother!" They knew that the priests were taking out a procession on the appearance of small-pox in the town. Small-pox was the mark and sign-manual of the Goddess's displeasure; she came among her children as a pestilence, as the small-pox fiend.

The wheeled tower advanced slowly, drawn by Brahmans. Under the tiers of painted wood in a little shrine was a figure of the small-pox spirit made of rice with almonds for the eyes. The crowd called out blessings and prayers to Shitala Mata, and would, the moment after the tower had passed down the street, have resumed their merriment; but a few yards further on the tower stopped with a jolt, and furious voices were heard raised in argument. A band of un-



touchables running out of a narrow lane blocked the street.

“What d’you want? Get back to your quarter,” the Brahmans shouted.

“We want to help drag the chariot of the Goddess.”

There was a shout of laughter from the crowd. An untouchable seized one of the ropes by which the Brahmans pulled the wheeled tower. A Maratha struck him in the face for his temerity. The untouchables rushed forward, grabbing the ropes, thrusting aside the Brahmans ; and in a moment the street was in an uproar. Suka pressed forward with the others to give the untouchables the thrashing they deserved. They were few in number and Marathas came running from every side-street. Suka saw one untouchable in front of him, gesticulating wildly, and drove his fist into the man’s sweat-gleaming negroid face, felt the nose crush under his knuckles, saw the blood spurt and heard a shriek. “Wahah !” Suka screamed. The man had crumpled up at his feet ; he drew back his foot and kicked, crashing his heavy iron-shod sandals into the man’s mouth. It was soon over, the untouchables driven off with broken heads and scarred faces, and the Goddess’s chariot resumed its progress. The crowd was put in a good humour by the ignominious rout of the untouchables. They forgot all about small-pox and streamed off down the street, shouting and laugh-



ing. Suka found he had been separated from his friends. He felt restless and wildly excited. What shall I do now? I must do something wild. And the words "something wild" beat on like the refrain of his pulsing temples. He looked about him, his fists clenched, his eyes aflame. And then suddenly he remembered what his friends had told him about the Victoria Gardens. Why, of course, the very place. It's where I've been meaning to go all night, I'd be there already but for those bastards of untouchables having wasted so much of my time.

As he came to the gate of the Gardens a sudden fear took him. Am I too late? I ought to have come here before. There'll be no one left unpartnered.

And indeed the Gardens were very quiet, the long paths stretching away into the shadows of heavy mango-trees. How sweet the mango-blossom was, pungent as a drug, stirring one's blood. Suka went slowly down the central path that was bordered with tubiscus, his sandals crunching on the gravel. Starlight glimmered on white clusters of jasmine and the grey sleek leafless champak-trees. Here was the bamboo-grove, the feathery leaves all silently aquiver, though there seemed no breeze to move them.

And then suddenly he saw her, rigid against a tree, her face raised to the sky, her hands clasped in an attitude of prayer. She turned at his coming, but did not move away. She was a



Brahman woman he saw, with white rose-buds in her hair and her sari was very splendid. He walked up to her and she remained quite still. She raised her face to his and he put his arm round her.

“Were you waiting for anyone?” he whispered.

“Yes, for someone like you.”

For a moment he was almost shocked at her frankness, and then he saw her dimpling smile and he thought she was the loveliest creature he had ever seen. How soft her hands were too, a grand lady's hands.

“What's your name?”

“Ah, never mind that,” she laughed, throwing back her head, her teeth gleaming very white.

He gave a sigh of desire, “How beautiful you are,” and fell to kissing her.

He felt rather shamefaced as he climbed the stairs of his *chawl*—his head was aching from the *bhang*, “and however I'll be able to work to-day I don't know”. He stopped for a moment outside the door of their room. There was a murmur inside, “Oh God, I hope not that awful Gujarati widow.” He threw open the door with a clatter and saw the widow bending over Bhimi. She turned at the noise of his entering and whispered: “Hush! She's very ill.” He didn't believe her, thinking it was some new religious nonsense, but when he came nearer and saw



Bhimi's flushed face and fever-bright eyes, he bent down beside her, took her hand and murmured, "What is it? Bhimi! What is it?" She only turned and moaned. "It came on this morning," the widow whispered. "We wanted to send for you then but she wouldn't let us. She said she didn't want you disturbed. And then when the fever increased towards evening we sent for you but couldn't find you. They said you had left the garage but didn't know where you had gone."

He nodded, for the moment dumb with pity and remorse. Then, "What is the fever?" he asked.

"Small-pox."

"Oh . . ."

He sat down abruptly. Small-pox! That wheeled tower with the image of the small-pox fiend made of white rice, staring steadily with its almond eyes . . .

Bhimi was troubled with fearful dreams. Probably the clamour in the streets below disturbed her fevered mind; for all day long the Exorcists passed through the streets beating the dunkluns, the disease-drums, to scare away the small-pox fiend. Goats were led bleating to the Temple of the Mother, there to have their tongues torn out, and their blood sprinkled on the doors of the faithful. A black cock, after being washed in sesamum oil, was taken in procession to be buried alive outside the city gate-



way. Crowds followed the Exorcists, and their cries and prayers and supplications mounted from the streets to the window of the room where Bhimi tossed and moaned in her delirium, her face flushed as though with fire, her eyes even when they opened blank and unseeing. She cried out prayers to Kali, "Have mercy, Mother, have mercy." Ah, she knew now that the Goddess was angry with her for deserting her husband. A Hindu woman must stay and serve her husband all her life, or else in lives to come she will suffer by relapse to a lower birth. She lay prostrate before the shrine of the Goddess on the windy downland of her hill-village. "Spare me, Mother ! Be pitiful ! Only tell me how I may make reparation." But the terrible black face with its lolling tongue showed no sign of life. Stillness, silence, a vast emptiness of all life and being. And then the prostrate figure of Shiva on whom the Goddess trampled stirred under her feet, stirred and looked at Bhimi, the stone face moved into an expression of piteous despair as though to say that even on the greatest of the Gods night and annihilation comes at last—"and what better fate can you, poor mortal, hope for ?" Bhimi bowed her head and a wind rushed past her ears ; temple and Goddess and hillside swept away and she opened her eyes upon her own quiet room. For a moment she gasped with relief. There lay Suka beside her, breathing deeply and evenly. All her pots and



pans were there, ranged neatly on their shelf; and Suka's *dhotis* and her saris hung from their clothes' line. Ah, the clean, pleasant room . . . And there was the little image of the Goddess she and the Gujarati widow had set up, the coconut head and the stiff robes stuck round a stool. How lifelike the eyes were. She had painted them with white paint, but now she wondered at her own skill. They seemed to shine with a fierce steely glitter. Even they seemed to move—yes, surely they turned and gazed at her? She started up. The coconut head quietly disentangled itself from its robes, rolled off the stool and hobbled stealthily towards her. She shrieked and rushed for the door. The stairs yawned terrifyingly dark before her. She paused and she heard the bump and shuffle of the coconut head behind her. She turned to run, caught her foot in the skirt of her sari and fell down the steep stairs, and utter blackness enveloped her.

“ Could you tell her about the child ? ” Suka asked.

The Gujarati widow nodded. “ I'll try. But it'll be a terrible shock for her. Only this morning she asked about it and I made up some story—said she was too weak to nurse it yet.”

“ I haven't the heart to tell her. You know how set she was on having a son . . . I'd have



liked a boy, too. But she simply lived for that one hope and dream. . . .”

And so they broke the news to her. “That fall, you see, dear.”

“Born dead?” Bhimi repeated in a faint hard voice. Her eyes were dry and her mouth never quivered. She lay stiff for a while and then turned her face to the wall.

Slowly the small-pox left her, the scabs coming off without injury to her face. But she lay all day like a statue, eating and drinking what she was given, nodding when Suka spoke to her.

“She’ll never get well—not properly well—until she begins to take an interest in things,” the Gujarati widow said. “I tell you what. Why not take her to Ahalya-Bai’s? To-morrow is Friday, the day she is possessed by the Goddess. I’ve always been meaning to go. You hear of such wonderful miracles she’s performed. Cures and all that. Why not try it?”

“Why not?” Suka echoed.

He had nursed Bhimi for a long while now. He couldn’t go to work and the bus company had sent him notice of dismissal. He’d saved a little money but that was going fast, what with medicines and nourishing food for Bhimi. Something would have to be done soon.

“We might try Ahalya-Bai’s. To-morrow you say? Right.”

For the first time since her illness Bhimi showed some interest, when Suka told her he was taking



her to Ahalya-Bai's palace. He ordered a bullock-cart to take her there, and once in the open air she began to look about her and to smile when Suka pointed out to her some beggar with a performing monkey or a band of hermaphrodite priests gambolling in front of a wayside-shrine of their patron goddess.

"What a grand place," she said as they drew up before a great square building. A troop of red-clad servants were standing about the doorway, and at first Bhimi and Suka felt nervous of entering. But they saw so many poor people, even ragged beggars and naked little children, passing unconcernedly through the great doorway without a word from the servants, that they at last plucked up their courage and went in. They followed the crowd to the central courtyard of the house ; Bhimi squatted down against one of the pillars of the colonnade.

"Tired ? " Suka asked.

She shook her head and smiled up at him. He felt very happy that he had brought her. That blank drugged look had gone out of her eyes. The woman squatting next to her began to talk about Ahalya-Bai. "It's wonderful the miracles she's performed. Even if you don't actually ask her for anything, just coming here seems to make you better. It's a funny thing, you know ; Ahalya's the widow of our Raja Bahadur. And when he was alive she was quite ordinary, a fine lady and all that, but nothing



remarkable. It's only after his death that she's become so holy, and that the Goddess takes possession of her."

"I've never been before," Bhimi confessed.

"Really now? Well, it'll be a great experience for you, I can promise."

There was a dais at one end of the courtyard with a single chair on it, a stiff thronelike affair of carved teakwood.

"Yes, that's where she sits," Bhimi's neighbour pointed out. "And here are the musicians," she added as they, with conches and drummers and trumpeters, filed untidily on to the dais and squatted at one side. A murmur of interest passed over the crowd; men stopped chewing cardamum seeds and gaped, shifting restlessly to get a better view between the files of turbaned heads.

And presently Ahalya-Bai herself appeared. Bhimi gazed eagerly at the seeress and was disappointed to find her a plump young woman, rather weary and scornful, looking out over the crowd with lustreless eyes and raised eyebrows. Beautiful, of course, Bhimi admitted; these Brahman women always were, with their milky skin and pale eyes; but with that Brahman hardness and cold aloofness. Yet when one of the musicians (and you could see by their expression and the way their eyes followed her how devoted they were to her) leaned over suddenly to smooth out the carpet which had rucked up



in front of her and over which she might have tripped, Bhimi was struck with the sudden sweetness of her smile. Her whole face seemed to open out like a frond of seaweed under the returning wave. Then she sat down on her throne, resting her arms on the chair-arms and keeping her head very straight and stiff. How royal she looked, Bhimi thought ; her square proud face and the tall crown above it and the garlands about her shoulders. Bhimi looked up at Suka for a moment, wondering if he was impressed. He was still leaning against the pillar, and he seemed to be staring very hard at the seeress on the platform. "Awed in spite of himself," Bhimi said to herself. But she was wrong, for Suka's rapt attention had another cause ; he had recognised in Ahalya-Bai the girl he met on Holi night in Victoria Gardens. His first feeling was of astonishment ; and then he thought, "Well, I never. And fancy her pretending to be a seeress." And then he remembered certain delicious intimacies. "Oh well, why not ? After all it was Holi night," and he, too, saw how she smiled at the musician when he straightened the carpet in front of her as she walked to her throne, and it reminded him of the smile she had given him when he first addressed her in the shadow of the bamboo-trees. He wondered if she would see him leaning up against the pillar. Surely not, for the courtyard was crowded and she glanced so incuriously at



her audience ; and yet for a moment her eyes seemed to rest on him, but evidently he was too far away for her to recognise him for the pale heavy-lidded eyes soon moved away.

“ So Ahalya was her name,” Suka repeated to himself and he felt a thrill of pride. All these dumb-simple creatures goggling devotedly up at the great seeress, how they would turn and gasp if he told them, just mentioned casually, that he’d once spent a night with the holy woman. But he wouldn’t do such a thing ; it wouldn’t be fair ; and (who knows ?) there might be a chance of another meeting.

And so he was probably the only one in the courtyard who did not at once gasp and utter amazed cries when, as though under the intoxicating spell of the music, Ahalya-Bai began to pass into her trance. First her whole body went rigid, her head jerked back and the eyes were wild and staring so that you saw the whites all round the pupils, and the knuckles of her hands shone white as she gripped the chair-arms. The colour seemed to leave her face and her mouth and deep hollows shadowed her cheeks ; her face was a still grey mask. The drums rattled madly and the throbbing note of the conches boomed and echoed. You could hear people catch their breath, a sudden gulp and then a soft hiss. They were whispering and craning, pushing and swaying. “ Look how stiff and straight she is ; like an idol ; like an image of the God-



dess. And her face so still and white like the Goddess's silver mask in the great temple." Even Suka began at last to feel uneasy and afraid. That plump young face with its sudden infectious smile had disappeared and in its place was an ageless thin expressionless façade of ivory, a drawn grey mouth and eyes like polished pebbles. "Can it be she?" he wondered. "What has happened to her? What is this trick? She must be a witch to change herself like that." He glanced down at Bhimi. She was enthralled. She had a little rosary in her hand and the smooth beads flickered between her fingers, and he could hear her murmuring "Mother! Mother!"

From somewhere in the courtyard a woman's voice rose, cracked and harsh, lifting to a nervous screech. "I have prayed so often. I have done every penance that the priests told me of. I have washed the feet of many Brahmans and drunk that sanctified water and I have washed the images of the Goddess in our family chapel with ointments and honey and milk. But my prayer has never been answered."

And then in a strange voice, so deep and resonant that strangers to these meetings almost jumped with surprise, Ahalya said:

"And what was your prayer?"

"A male-child."

"You shall have one within a year from now."

"Aie! Aie!" The woman began a long



incoherent scream of gratitude, broke off in the middle and fell in convulsions. Her friends supported her, patted her arms, splashed milk in her face.

Other requests were put forward and granted with the same graciousness, and from all sides women's voices rose in gratitude, praising the Goddess and showering blessings on the earthly vessel she had chosen for her revelations. All the time the drums beat feverishly, louder and ever louder, rising upon the wave of the people's frenzy. You could see the sweat shining on the faces of the musicians and their heads wagged drunkenly ; and all over the courtyard heads swayed and nodded, arms were raised in praise and blessing, hands reached out in supplication.

The seeress was shaken with frightful spasms. Her attendants came near and soothed her, and with a last and rending shudder she fell sideways over one arm of her chair, limp and weak, sweat dripping from her face. She was half-carried from the dais, her attendants holding over her a saffron umbrella and fanning her with plantain-leaves while the crowd shouted blessings. The musicians packed up their instruments and people scrambled and jostled for the door, clattered down the steps and out into the busy clamour of the streets.

Suka was still dazed and puzzled by the strange performance ; that rigid hieratic figure on the dais with the resonant voice of authority—and



the warm soft girl he had held in his arms . . . But I'm glad we went, he said to himself, for it's a long time since I've seen Bhimi looking so alive and happy. And he felt guilty to be always remembering that meeting on Holi night, when Bhimi clutched his arm and smiled up in his face, and chattered away just as she had done in the old days. She felt a curious certainty that her prayers had been answered ; the cloud of the past months was lifted from her and she laughed and talked like a child. " Poor Suka," she said, laying her head against his cheek, " I'm afraid I've not been much company for you lately."

" But you were so ill," he protested.

" Yes, I feel as if I had come out of a drugged sleep. I just want to look about me and feel glad that I'm alive. And you've been so good to me . . ."

" I'll have to be looking for another job."

" Won't they take you back at the garage? "

He shook his head. " I chucked it up when you were ill. I had to stay with you. But the manager was annoyed. Now they've filled my place and there's no vacancy. I asked a friend of mine who was working there with me and he told me that."

" Well, it's a shame. As if they imagine a husband wouldn't want to be with his wife when she's ill. Oh, but you'll get another job easily enough."

" I hope so." Suka had had to borrow from



his friend the Pathan moneylender, trusting to the future. "I'd like to be someone's private driver. You have some rest then—not always having to hang about the garage doing any odd job the manager tells you to."

And while they were still talking of this they heard a man's voice on the stairs calling out, "Is there anyone there?"

Suka went to the door and looked out, "What d'you want? Looking for someone?"

"Yes, they told me downstairs that there was a motor-driver living somewhere on this floor."

"That must be me. I don't think there's any other driver in this *chawl*."

"Are you employed at the moment?"

"No."

"My mistress wants a driver and you were recommended."

"Who's your mistress?"

"The lady Ahalya-Bai."

Bhimi had come to the door and how she clapped her hands with delight. "Well, isn't that wonderful, Suka? We were just saying how you ought to get private employment and that very moment there comes this offer. Isn't that just providence?"

Suka asked the man in. "Have some tea?"

"Thank you. But I mustn't stay long. Ahalya-Bai's expecting me back."

"What sort of mistress d'you find her?"

"We're all devoted to her. So considerate and



kind. You're in luck, I can tell you. I wonder where she heard of you. Have you been in Tryambuc long? I don't remember seeing you in the bazaar."

"No, we came from the hills; but we've settled down here. I was driving lorries and buses before."

Bhimi busied herself over the stove. Suka thought the man looked curiously at him and he continued rather hurriedly: "And then I got friendly with one of the doorkeepers at Ahalya-Bai's palace and told him I was looking for a job now. I suppose he recommended me. His name? Well, isn't it stupid of me, it's just slipped out of my mind. Rama was it, or Ganu . . ."

"Might have been Rama Harmant."

"That's the man."

The other nodded and seemed satisfied. Tea was soon ready. Suka took his cup over to the window and sipped slowly, gazing out over the street. There was a confused noise coming from somewhere in the city.

"Those untouchables demonstrating again," Ahalya's messenger said.

Suka made no reply and the other went on, "I think there's going to be bad trouble soon. I hear that one of the Priests of the Kali Temple was found beaten to death this morning. Everyone says it must have been the untouchables. Who else would commit such a sacrilege?"



But Suka said nothing. He was thinking to himself, "So she recognised me after all."

Ahalya sat at one of the windows of her palace. This was the room she had chosen for herself. It was on the top floor, small and airy, and you could see over the roofs of the city to the open country beyond. She didn't like most of the rooms in the palace, great dark halls with narrow windows and heavily carved beams, the walls muffled with sombre hangings ; airless and sunless, and the dust seemed to clog your nostrils and there was always an acrid odour of decay. Now since her husband's death she had closed all those grand rooms and spent her time up here, reading a little, and sometimes composing verses which she tore up as soon as they were finished. To-day she just sat thinking. Her new driver was coming to-day. "And so I'll be staying on in Tryambuc," she said, for she had almost resolved to leave the place and return to Poona where she had been born and where she had spent her childhood. Just to be back in Poona for a few weeks even . . . And yet, how would she meet her friends again ? She couldn't go home . . . not now. And for a moment's bitter sorrow she thought of the old square house with its heavy roof like a Bernese chalet and the teak-wood gables carved with flowers and animals, the old door painted a dull red with a lovely brass handle, and the dark re-echoing colonnade



inside. Her father came shuffling downstairs and, seeing Ahalya, called her to him. She was his great favourite, the only child of his third wife. Very soft and gentle his voice was, and his tired old eyes blinked down at her. The house was always full of friends and relations and dependants, and he sat and listened to them and sipped his tea ; but soon he would call a servant and tell him to bring Ahalya, and then he would lose interest in the discussion round him and whisper to his little daughter and stroke her long hair.

They would ask his advice. “What do *you* think, Diwan Bahadur ?”

“What’s that ? What’s that ? I didn’t catch what you were saying.”

“About education. These thousands of boys who appear for the matriculation and pass their B.As. and only a tiny percentage of them can hope for a living wage. What good has this English education done us ? It turns out boys with the minds and ambitions of clerks and can’t even provide them with the posts of clerks.”

“Yes, yes, it’s very sad for the young fellows. Ah, it was different when I was a boy. Only forty-one candidates for the matriculation from the whole Presidency in the year that I sat for it. Think of that, only forty-one. And perhaps twenty were successful. I was always one of the lucky ones. I soon got Government employment. And now I’ve been drawing a pension for



thirty years—how sick the pensions department must be. That old Diwan Bahadur Limaye still drawing his pension.” He chuckled. “That’s what they must be saying. Still drawing his pension. And going to draw it for many years yet.”

Everyone expressed pious hopes that it would be for many decades. He looked down at his daughter leaning against his knee.

“Well, little Ahalya, you’d have hardly recognised Poona in those days. Why when I went to Bombay for my matriculation you couldn’t go all the way by train—you had to walk for seven miles down the Ghats and then get the train at Karjat. That seems funny to think of nowadays, doesn’t it? My father came with me then, I remember. He always used to wear the old-fashioned *pagota*, a great flat turban sticking out on either side of his shoulders like a cartwheel.” He spread out his hands. “Yes, as big as that. What would you think, Ahalya, if I wore a turban like that?”

She looked up at him. He always wore a little Brahmanic cap, the scarlet faded to dull pink, the gold tassels long since shed; it was generally perched over one ear with a hint of the rakish that was in ridiculous contrast to his thin sunken mouth and tired eyes. His clothes were always shabby and old-fashioned. Instead of the English shirt, short coat, and flimsy tightly-tied *dhoti* that the young men now affected (and at which



fashion he was always pouting disapproval) he wore a white jacket tied on the left side with little bows and a blanket-like *dhoti* folded so that the heavy-coloured fringe swung down from right thigh to left ankle. He was quite a figure in the town. People turned and pointed him out to each other, the lean erect old man in scarlet slippers. Very rich, they told each other, and yet he always dresses in the old-fashioned style and will never use a motor, and only goes in a carriage if he has to attend an official reception.

When still a child Ahalya had been pleasantly aware of the respect in which her family was held. Her old father with his Government-bestowed title of Diwan Bahadur, and her mother who was revered for her piety and munificence—too pious, Ahalya thought, for she seemed so wrapped up in her religion as to have little time to spare for her daughter. She would talk brightly to Ahalya, point out to her the duties of Hindu girls, let her have new saris whenever she wanted and kiss her briskly, but all the time Ahalya knew that even this perfunctory affection was almost an effort for her and that she only began to live when she resumed the ceremonies of the household chapel or went to one of the temples in the evenings (attended by maid-servants with silver bowls of holy water and trays of flowers for the gods) or paid a visit to some saint or anchorite for religious instruction. And so it was chiefly her father that she looked to for companionship



and affection. She had no brother (a terrible grief to her father, as to any orthodox Hindu, that heaven had denied him a son to perform the ceremonies at his death) and her step-sisters had been married off very young. They only came to the house for family festivals and Ahalya spoke little with them till the great question of her education arose. She had set her mind on going to college. Her mother passively disapproved but was not greatly concerned. "I think it's a pity," she said. "But many girls even of the best Brahman families do go to college nowadays, so I suppose it's not surprising that you want to go, too. Well, as long as you don't start wearing wrist-watches and riding a bicycle, I dare say there won't be much harm done."

Her father was at first firmly opposed to any such idea but he found it hard to resist Ahalya's pleading. And then, he admitted to himself, it was the thing nowadays. And after all he was, by virtue of his official title, on various uplift committees that were continually passing resolutions urging people to have their daughters properly educated—resolutions that were always passed without opposition because they were considered to be pleasing to the authorities—and it would probably put up his credit with the officials if he could tell them he had sent his own daughter to college—perhaps even that she had passed the matriculation. He consulted his



married daughters, Ahalya's step-sisters, and they at once to his surprise said, "Oh yes, do let her go to college." And they told Ahalya how much they envied her. "If only we'd a chance like that." It was rather pathetic the change in them, Ahalya thought; they had always seemed so grand and aloof, and now they are treating her almost with respect. "You lucky child," they sighed. "I must say I was surprised at Father even listening to the idea. I'm sure if we'd suggested it when we were children he'd have bitten our heads off."

So Ahalya went to school and in time passed her matriculation and her father felt very proud of her and even, to her mother's horror, let her ride a bicycle. "All the other girls do," she pointed out. "And it's much nicer than trudging through the bazaar rubbing shoulders with outcastes and untouchables."

"Yes, yes, I see that. And after all the old Queens of history used to ride on horseback. Still, I don't know what some of my friends will say if they see you on a bicycle. They'll say I'm spoiling you up all wrong and that I must be going weak-headed in my old age."

So her friends called for her every morning, and she gave a last pat to her hair which was always adorned with rose-petals, picked up her satchel and ran out to the courtyard where her precious bicycle was kept, and then they all rode down the street together, ringing their bells and



slipping between the clattering tongas and the fruit-barrows and the crowds of gossiping idlers.

The Rajwada College lay across the river. Along the old bridge bullock-carts were coming in from the country piled with vegetables and fruits for the bazaar. Once or twice they had to dismount so great was the press of carts—and they laughed at the shouts and curses of the cart-men, kicking and twisting the tails of their bullocks who stood wedged together, while a single policeman yelled at everyone in turn and threatened to run cases against the whole lot of them. The girls leaned their bicycles against the balustrade of the bridge. There was always a delicious breeze coming down the river and the deep still water was like a pavement of amethyst. Heavy mango-trees hung over each bank and the dome of a temple rose like a hill of snow between the metallic-glistering foliage. In the distance you could hear two golden orioles calling, a lovely rich mellow note, dropping suddenly like a cadence of flute-music—"weal-ah-woe—weal-ah-woe". And then the birds darted out from the shadow of the trees and went circling over the calm river, their yellow plumage glorious in the sun.

"We must be getting on or we shall be late," for by now most of the bullock-carts had passed over the bridge, and the girls bent over the handle-bars of their bicycles and rode quickly over the long bridge, the river-breeze catching



their blue saris and shaking the rose-petals from their hair.

But they weren't late after all. There was still a group of boys lounging against the college gateway and among them Ahalya noticed that handsome youth whose name as she had learnt was Pralad—she turned away her head quickly, for she always flushed if he looked at her, and hurried past towards the cool dark room under the tower where the English lessons were held.

They were reading Wordsworth that term and Ahalya found him dull, and not all Professor Joshi's exposition of the "simple charm" of the Lucy poems persuaded her to recant. She had liked Tennyson—Guinevere and Lancelot had excited her. She loved stories of romantic love, and she borrowed from her friends cheap paper-backed English novelettes about adoring but misunderstood governesses who turned out to be heiresses, and wicked Scotch earls and handsome captains in faultless evening dress whose well-shod feet sank deep into the pile of priceless Turkey carpets. She even went to the cinema (though she never told her father of this, knowing well enough that none of her pleading would reconcile him to such a horror) and revelled in the cloying sentimentalities of Hollywood.

She began to write Marathi verses ; she knew they were feeble enough when she had finished, but the writing of them gave her an exquisite pleasure, she would often burst out crying with



the delicious emotions of her own dreams, and she treasured the verses in which she had expressed her longings and ideals. And then one day a slip of paper in which she had scribbled some verses slipped out of her Wordsworth in the schoolroom and a friend picked it up and began giggling over it.

“Give that to me,” she whispered, blushing furiously, tears starting to her eyes, and her whole being aflame with hatred of the clumsy creature who had violated the shrine of her most secret joys. The girl resisted and Ahalya snatched it from her and tore the paper into little pieces. The Professor looked up and several boys turned round, surprised at the noise from the benches of the girls—they were usually so quiet, bending over their books with lowered heads—and this sudden scrimmage was amusingly unusual. “Oh, I shall make you pay for that one day,” Ahalya whispered, and she spent the rest of the lesson thinking of the various ways of killing and how pleasant it would be to poison that plump simpering creature who had once pretended to be her friend. Or perhaps I might commit suicide, and then she’ll feel sorry, then it’ll be too late for her to wish she had never been so cruel. . . . But the friend afterwards came and wept her apologies, and Ahalya cried, too, and forgave her.

“Honestly I thought they were wonderfully good, Ahalya ; I could hardly believe they were



your own verses. Oh, go on, you're an absolute genius if you can write poetry like that. Why ever don't you send up something to the college Magazine? "

Ahalya pondered over this advice. It would be a triumph to see one of her compositions in print. But not my poetry, she thought, I couldn't bear people to smile over it and criticise. And in the end she wrote rather a stilted little essay called "What is wrong with Hindu Marriage in Modern India". She didn't sign it with her own name, but Professor Joshi, who edited the Magazine, guessed who had written it and told her he was going to print it. "It's got some excellent ideas in it," he said. "D'you mind if we cut just one or two phrases? Not quite so many references to 'the old Rishis of India'. I like this bit. It's true terrible tragedies occur when young fellows educated in England are married off by their parents to girls who are utterly uneducated and haven't one idea in common with them. You're quite right about that. People are only just beginning to realise it. Yes, we'll be very glad to print your article. You want to keep this nom-de-plume, do you? Yes, very well."

A few weeks later her mother began to talk to her about her marriage, and Ahalya thought what a curious coincidence it was that this should be so soon after her essay on that subject. She didn't want to get married yet—unless, unless . . . and



for a moment she thought of that handsome boy Pralad lounging against the college gateway and staring coolly at the girls coming in. . . .

“But you see, you are seventeen now,” her mother’s voice went on. It was calm and even, so that sometimes Ahalya felt she wanted to shriek or do something outrageous to break that flat assurance—but probably even then her mother would raise her eyebrows and say that that was hardly the way for a Brahman girl of rank to behave, but there, that’s what came of sending girls to school. “And you may not want to get married yet as you tell me, but if you wait much longer you won’t get married at all and that won’t be very amusing for you.”

“In Europe if girls don’t want to marry they just don’t. Or they wait for someone they really love.”

“In India girls have no money or property of their own and when their parents are dead no one wants to look after an ageing spinster.”

“But one must marry someone one is in love with.”

“Love?” She shrugged her shoulders.

“Well, don’t you love Father?”

“Of course I do.” She looked at Ahalya with wide, confident eyes. “You shouldn’t ask me such a question. Of course I love your father. He is all the world to me. When he is not with me I am only half myself.”



“ But you never saw him till you were married. He told me that himself. How could you have fallen in love? Or was it just by chance? ”

“ What’s all this nonsense about falling in love? From the moment I was old enough to know about God I worshipped Him. From the moment I married your father I loved him. He is so much a part of me and of my life that I could not exist without him, any more than the world could exist without a God.”

“ But, Mother, in all the great love-stories . . . ”

“ Stories? Gracious, my child, what ideas you pick up from your books. You read far too much. Or get funny ideas at school. I knew it would happen. As soon as you get married you won’t worry about such things any more.”

And soon she heard that as a preliminary to her marriage the astrologers had been consulted and were busy comparing her horoscope with those of any eligible young men they could think of.

Ahalya couldn’t persuade her father to postpone the business. He shook his head. “ You must be sensible, little Ahalya. I’m an old man now and I can’t live much longer. I want to see you settled before I die.”

“ Ah, but just a year or two more won’t make any difference.”

But it was useless. However she argued he was



immovable. Finally he said, "And anyway it's too late now. We've found a very fine husband for you. He's coming to the house next week and you'll see him."

"Oh," she gasped. "Oh, whoever is he?"

"One of the leading Brahman nobles," he said impressively. "The Raja Bahadur Saheb of Tryambuc."

She had not heard of him. "How old is he?"

"About twenty-three, I think. He's well educated—been at college in Bombay—speaks English—fond of reading."

She looked gratefully at her father. "Oh, I'm glad it's not some old-fashioned middle-aged creature."

"No, Ahalya, I took great trouble to find the sort of husband I thought my little girl would be happy with."

Ahalya's suitor was visiting the house and Ahalya was to meet him at tea. She sat in a room by herself, arranging a chaplet of champak-flowers. Her hair was brushed smoothly back, parted in the middle and tied in a tight round knot low on the nape of her neck; when she had finished the flower-chaplet, and all the buds lay close together pressed in a stiff little circle, she wound them round the knot of her hair and tied them in place with gold thread. Her mother came in from lunch.

"What's he like?" she asked excitedly.



“He’s a handsome young man, quiet and thoughtful. You were a goose not to help me with lunch. You could have shown him how gracefully you walk.”

“Mother, I couldn’t. I’m sick with nerves at the thought of tea. Can’t you come, too?”

“Don’t be silly, child. I’ll take you to the door. And then in you go, and he’ll salute you with folded hands and say ‘Namaskar!’ and you do exactly the same. And then your father will tell you to sit down. It’s nothing to worry about.”

“Oh, Mother, it is. It’s agony. D’you think he will speak to me much? It’s lovely that he’s educated and clever. But perhaps he’ll think me simple and childish. He must be used to meeting such fashionable smart women in Bombay.”

“H’m. If half what one hears about those Bombay women is true I should think he’ll be delighted to meet a modest, decent Hindu girl. You’d better wear your gold sandals, but don’t forget to slip them off at the door. And have you got those nice toe-rings your father gave you?”

“Yes, Mother, of course I have. Look, do help me with my sari. This Benares silk is so stiff and heavy.”

“There! Keep the fringe well up over your breasts. It’s not modest to let your bodice be seen. Right up under the chin. That’s right.



And the heavy gold fold sweeping down your back—it'll swing nicely when you walk."

And at four o'clock Ahalya was at the door of her father's study. She kicked off her sandals and stood irresolute for a moment. The two men were talking together. Right foot over the doorstep or left? Feet flat on the ground. Her father looked up and saw her.

"Ah, Ahalya, come in. Come in." She went in with bowed head, arms hanging stiffly on either side. A young man saluted her and mechanically, without looking up, she replied.

"Sit down, Ahalya, dear. Here, beside me."

The servants brought in tea and plates of spices. Her father poured out and gave a cup to Ahalya. She felt hot with embarrassment. She remained staring at her cup. Then the young man leant across and handed her a plate of *chioda*. She looked up for a moment and he smiled and she smiled back. She saw that he was wearing a long brown coat of the old-fashioned kind, reaching to the knees, with buttons all down the front, and he had a very rich gold shawl over one shoulder. He wore heavy spectacles. His smile was nervous, almost apologetic. A dim little person she would probably have judged him had she looked at him dispassionately, but her first feeling was of immense relief that there was no need for her to be frightened of her future husband. He spoke to her very politely, ingratiatingly, and to her brisk,



increasingly self-assured answers he replied breathlessly, "Yes, yes. Quite so. I hoped you would think so."

"And how d'you like the idea of living in Tryambuc?"

"I don't know anything about the place. Is it very gay?"

"Not gay; no, not gay at all, I'm afraid, but it's a fine old place, very fine——"

"A *wonderful* place," put in her father. "A very holy town, full of old temples and picturesque houses—many people would call you lucky to be going to live there."

"And we have some fine processions."

"Yes, the Raja Bahadur Saheb is chief trustee of the Kali Temple there; and has the privilege of walking beside the Goddess's palanquin in the Friday processions." Her father nodded portentously; adding after a pause, "So you see what a grand place Tryambuc is."

"It must be very nice," she said politely.

She had been favourably impressed with her husband's palace and the evident respect in which he was held by everyone. There were a great many salaaming servants and peons in red uniforms on either side of the wide stairway that led up to the front door—a stairway with a balustrade of carved dolphins. They went in to the cool courtyard where there was a fountain playing in the shade of papaia-trees and they were



welcomed by her husband's *Karbhari*, the manager of his estates, a venerable-looking creature who read a long laudatory speech and at the end broke into a song of his own composition which he sang earnestly and tunelessly in a thin cracked voice. Then they had tea together in one of the grand reception-rooms. They sat rather awkwardly opposite each other at a small table and all the servants and poor relations (and even casual visitors from the streets who had heard something was going on and crowded in to see) watched them and commented on Ahalya's appearance and squatted about the room, whispering and spitting.

"Don't you think we might empty the room a little?" Ahalya suggested.

Her husband smiled nervously and began to explain in English. "I don't think we ought to do that. It would look so proud and unfriendly. People are accustomed to come in and out of the public rooms of great men's houses. That's the old Hindu communal life, isn't it?"

Ahalya didn't answer that any custom which was labelled "old Hindu" was for that reason unattractive, and she contented herself with staring coldly at the inquisitive crowds.

But she soon found that was her husband's usual reply to all her suggestions. "Oh, I don't think we should. Our family have never done that. My father would have been horrified; you see, we are so much the foremost family



in Tryambuc that we are expected to set an example and people are always watching us.”

“Well, then,” she would reply, “let’s set them an example of being very modern and up to date.”

A slow shake of the head and that earnest puzzled look through the heavy spectacles.

“You can’t do that sort of thing in an orthodox town like Tryambuc. You’d shock and pain people too much, really good people too.”

They had really little in common. She soon found that his schooling in Bombay hadn’t broadened his mind in the least. He liked to talk about education in the abstract and had a collection of books on economics and politics and philosophy—but they were there to give him a feeling of studiousness by their very presence on their shelves. He would sometimes look at the titles, thinking to himself how interesting and important subjects like economics were—and there was that wonderful little book in the Home University series treating the whole subject in two hundred pages—and he would sometimes even pull out one of his books and settle himself down in a chair and stare frowning at the first page. But it was so much easier to sail off into the day-dreams that he loved—the inert surrender to a procession of pleasant images—and the printed page went blurred and remote, the bleak and craggy English phrases were dissolved in a mist of reminiscence and reflection. And then Ahalya



would come in and he would pretend she had interrupted him in his studies. "I always like to set aside a little time each day for serious reading." Ahalya would apologise, taken in by his earnest manner, and reading the impressive title of his book would try and lead the conversation round to concrete questions of progress and emancipation. But though he liked abstract discussion he was always alarmed at Ahalya's direct approach to everything. She would start off some theory about women's rights, which he thought was really rather indelicate for a wife to mention to a husband, and he would drift off into vague platitudes.

She tried to pin him down. "But don't you agree that women should have exactly the same education as men?"

"Well, I think it's a theory that's worth considering, but as long as society is as it is—especially in places like Tryambuc—it seems to me that it's not really practical—I mean, however much we may hope—you see we've no experience to guide us, really, have we?" And he became lost in meaningless side-issues.

He was acutely conscious of his dignity, too. As the leading noble of the town with the right of walking beside the Goddess's palanquin on her Friday processions (a privilege he was fantastically proud of, feeling the eyes of the whole city on him as he walked slowly along, staring blankly ahead through his thick glasses), he felt



that Ahalya hardly realised the importance of her position, the significance of her every remark which would be overheard and repeated everywhere. He did not even like her being found sitting in one of the main halls with him by any of his more orthodox friends, who were always paying him visits ("to show their respect" he would explain, but Ahalya believed they came to cadge meals)—scraggy mean-faced old pundits, officious schoolmasters and various dependants of the Raja Bahadur's family who had long ago established a vague right to hang about the house and turn up at meals and even settle down to sleep on the sofas of the sitting-rooms. All this meant that there was continual entertaining for her to arrange for, and though at first she thought it interesting to be in charge of so grand a house she soon found the routine of it wearying. The servants were intolerably bad (and if she complained of any of them and suggested his dismissal there were the same vague objections—"Oh, I shouldn't like to do that—the poor fellow was with my father, you see; he was taken from our estates especially to be a house-servant—I don't know what he'd do if we dismissed him") and this meant that she had to be in the kitchen all morning supervising, ordering, even herself cooking, otherwise there was no hope of lunch by noon. After the meal she felt so tired she would lie down and sleep and then in the evening get supper ready. And she never knew how



many very holy and learned pundits or dear faithful poor relations there would be to provide for. Her husband would come in at the last moment and say, "Oh, by the way, the Shrimanth Vishvanath and the Mahamahopadhyaya and some friends of theirs have just arrived," and if she showed irritation or impatience he would look distressed and reproachful and deeply disappointed in her. But what was even more annoying was the way he obviously felt rather daring and modern in having married an "educated" girl. He used to say as Ahalya came in with the rice, "Of course, I quite see your point of view, Panditji, but an educated woman is a great companion. My dear wife and I have fine talks and discussions together, don't we?" And Ahalya was expected to nod shyly and smile. He would have been shocked if she had begun talking in front of the guests.

She found that by the end of one day she had had no time for anything except the work of the house. She would take down one of the English novels she had been so fond of, but they seemed meaningless now ; she read a few pages and then let the book drop with a sigh of weariness. She still continued to write occasional verses, but one day her husband picked up a little poem addressed to the God of Love and was surprised. "I don't think that's in very good taste—from a person in our position, do you?—poems about the Love-God sound rather, well—courtesans



and people like that sing those sort of songs and so the idea doesn't leave a pleasant taste in the mouth . . .” She tried to conciliate his prejudice by writing a poem for him on his birthday. He read it through carefully and slowly and then re-read it. He was perhaps flattered at the expressions of regard and it was nice to be compared in such ornate quotations with the warrior-god Rama. “Very nice. Very clever, indeed, my dear. I suppose they taught you to write verses at school. Yes, yes, very well turned ; I can see you must have been to quite a lot of trouble to write this poem. Of course I'm not over-fond of poetry myself. I like religious and philosophic poetry, of course ; that gives you ideas to turn over in your mind ”—and he thought of various thin theosophic prose-poems he'd read in the papers, whose images were so easy to understand and so evocative of sensuous religiosity—“but these love-poems don't really appeal to me. It's such a delicate subject, of course . . .”

After they had been married little over a year he fell ill of influenza, it turned to pneumonia, and in a few days he was dead. Ahalya's first emotion was astonishment. To the last he had seemed the same, serious, pompous, peering at her owlshly through his glasses, and talking of his family and position even in delirium, and then suddenly he was still, quite still. They took the spectacles off, and the busy little frown was



smoothed away, and his face in repose was very simple and childlike. There followed a storm of passionate resentment, a bitterness that almost overwhelmed her reason. Looking down at him she almost hated him, hated his calm little expressionless face. He was all right, he'd never had anything to worry him, he died as passively as he had lived, he just slipped away leaving her. And what was left to her? Now she was a Hindu widow, despised, solitary, pitiable. She must go through the hideous ritual, the shaving of her head, the breaking of her bracelets on her arm, and she must forswear for ever all ornaments and all coloured dresses and wrap herself in a white sheet of penitential grief. Dumbly she let the priests perform the ceremonies of widowhood, she sat in her darkened room and fasted, and all the time she was hardly aware of anything but her rage and misery. She felt cheated of her life and she looked forward to long years of dismal emptiness, a passive expectation of her own death—that was all the life that Hindu custom would permit her.

She became ill with depression and sorrow ; she couldn't eat and suffered from strange fancies. Perhaps in her weakness and mental surrender the spell of the old town laid hold on her. She began to dream of the Goddess. She imagined she heard her name called in the night and she arose and went out to answer the Goddess's call. Soon she realised that she was sleep-walking.



In a queer wonderland between sleeping and waking she knew that her dreams were only dreams yet she could not resist the impulsion to leave her room and wander, seeking the origin of that compelling cry. Once she fell asleep in the afternoon and again heard a voice calling her and went out on to the verandah overlooking the courtyard. She was vaguely aware of a noise below, of people murmuring and whispering, and then the voice died away and she returned to her room. After this she noticed a new respect shown her by the servants. They salaamed low and addressed her obsequiously, yet she knew that they were whispering about her as soon as she turned her back.

She recovered slowly and was no longer troubled in dreams ; but that curious attitude of the servants persisted. Not only of the servants, for she saw some of her husband's friends talking with his *Karbhari* and clerks and as she passed them they salaamed. "How odd," she thought. "They used hardly to notice my existence when my husband was alive. I wonder what has made them so polite." She didn't like to question any of the servants directly and so betray her curiosity (and perhaps forfeit their new respect that she found very agreeable), and if she hinted at their recent attention and zeal in working for her they merely stared blankly at her or mumbled unintelligibly.

"I wonder . . . I wonder? . . ." She went



slowly up the narrow wooden staircase. At the top a boy was squatting, studying some religious book, and his lips moved in his reading. At the sound of her sandals he looked up and scrambled hastily to his feet. She remembered his name, Kalasha. He was one of the *brahmacharis* or Brahman boy-students maintained in charity in their house. All the orthodox nobles piqued themselves on their generosity in giving free education to their poorer caste-fellows. Most of the *brahmacharis* that Ahalya had seen in the house were thin insect-like creatures with spectacles and inky fingers, very humble and insignificant, who would get jobs as clerks. But this Kalasha was different. She'd heard her husband regret that he had ever taken him into his house ; he was lazy, it appeared, and casual and disrespectful. He was a finely-featured lad, coarsely handsome, more like a Mussulman than a Brahman. "We'll put him into the police," her husband had said. "It's hardly the career for a Brahman but he'll probably get into the C.I.D., for in spite of his being so lazy he must have more brains than the average police-recruit." And occasionally passing him in the courtyard, she had liked his appearance, liked his frank stare and the humorous line of his full mouth.

On a sudden impulse she addressed him now, "Kalasha, I want to ask you something."

"Yes, Bai Saheb ?"

"Just follow me, will you ?"



There was no one about and they went down the long dark corridor to her room. She opened the door and went in. He followed rather awkwardly.

She turned. "I suppose it's silly of me to bother about it—and it may be all fancy—you'll probably think it strange of me to have called you here like this, but I felt I must ask someone and I can't very well question the servants and then I suddenly saw you and felt I could trust you. I can, can't I?"

"Of course, Bai Saheb." His face showed neither curiosity nor amusement at her hurried breathless beginning. He waited quietly.

"It's this change in the atmosphere that I can't help feeling. The servants, I mean. And even my poor husband's friends. So curiously respectful. They used hardly to notice me. Now they treat me like someone of importance. Is this all very silly? Have you noticed anything?"

"Yes, Bai Saheb."

"Then tell me, what is it?"

"It is true they show you great respect."

"But why so recently?"

"Don't you really know?"

"No."

He looked hard at her, his yellow eyes still and expressionless.

"That time when you came out on to the balcony overlooking the courtyard . . ."



“ Yes, yes. I was asleep and I heard someone calling me. I half-knew I was dreaming but even that knowledge was part of the dream. I went out there and then the voice faded and so I went back to my room.”

“ Curious . . . I didn’t see it myself. But they say——”

“ Yes ? ”

“ They say you looked like a Goddess, or some inspired priestess, and that you stretched out your hand and said something in a deep voice.”

“ But said what ? ”

“ Oh, something about the Goddess Kali having called you.”

“ The Goddess . . . Perhaps it was she calling me . . . ”

“ But you don’t know ? ”

“ Why, of course I didn’t.” She thought for a moment. “ But it’s absurd, isn’t it ? I was ill. Delirious. I used to sleep-walk almost every night. I used even to wake up and find myself standing at the head of the stairs. And then I suppose I sleep-walked in the day. Nothing very strange in that.”

“ You didn’t feel anything else ? They say your face was distorted, almost unrecognisable ; that you looked awe-inspiring and frightening.”

She laughed. “ I think they must have been exaggerating.”

“ I wonder. I couldn’t make out whether or not to believe them. You might have been



possessed by the Goddess. I suppose such things do occur."

"But you don't really believe they do?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "One never knows what to believe."

"But supposing I wasn't possessed, then what would you think?"

"You have told me, Bai Saheb. Now I would say it was sleep-walking."

"You would say that now—but what did you think before?"

"Ah, that wouldn't be respectful to tell you."

"Never mind. I'd like to hear."

"I should have thought you were pretending."

"What!"

"Bai Saheb, you ordered me to tell you."

She laughed. "Yes, I suppose one might have thought that. Does anyone believe I was play-acting?"

"Oh no. They are all convinced you were possessed."

"Well, how dull for them, now that I'm recovered. There won't be any more possession-scenes."

He didn't answer for a while. Then he looked up and smiled mischievously. "Well, Bai Saheb, that's for you to say."

"No, I'm quite well now. Sleeping much better and none of those awful nightmares."

He bowed and soon after left her. A phrase of his came back to her. "That's for you to say."



What had he meant by that? She thought of calling him back. No, I can wait . . .

That afternoon her husband's *Karbhari*, a secretary, came to see her. He was worried about the confusion in which the affairs of the Raja Bahadur had been left.

"But I understood he was so rich. He never spoke to me of his affairs."

"Bai Saheb, he had great estates. But his father died heavily in debt. And the noble Raja Bahadur was so good and charitable, always giving donations to Temples and grants for the processions . . ."

"Yes, of course." She understood that. He so much enjoyed his position in the town that he would have starved rather than forfeit the admiring respect of the godly. The chief trustee of the Temples must be open-handed and liberal, must keep open house for the priests and set an example in munificence.

"But didn't you point out to him that he was nearly bankrupt?"

"Often and often, Bai Saheb, but he didn't like me to do so. He used to say, 'Mortgage some more land.' And the interest on the loans was soon as much as his income. Now there are no more lands to mortgage."

"Then what'll happen?"

"As long as the gracious Raja Bahadur was alive the creditors didn't press him because he told them he would soon pay them off, and he was



so much respected, and perhaps he could have got a loan from the Government . . .”

“Yes, yes,” she broke in impatiently. “But what are they going to do now?”

“Bai Saheb, they are insisting on payment. Even this house is mortgaged. We can’t even pay the interest.”

She lifted her head. “Ask them to wait a short while longer and they’ll be satisfied.”

He raised his eyebrows incredulously then. “As you order, Bai Saheb,” he said and left her.

It was a silly defiant thing to say, she knew. But it was either that or a storm of tears. She sank down on a couch. She had thought it bad enough to be a widow. But she was to be a pauper as well. . . . All the day she remained locked in her room, refusing food. She heard her servants whispering about her outside her door. One of them said, “Perhaps she is possessed by the Goddess again to-day.”

“Why, yes,” answered the other. “It’s a Friday, isn’t it? And last time was a Friday.”

“Very natural, considering Friday is sacred to the Goddess.”

They chatted on and Ahalya wanted to scream with fury. “The fools! The gossiping fools!”

She went to the door, unlocked it. There was a frightened patter of bare feet down the corridor. She went out. At the far end sitting, as before, at the head of the staircase, Kalasha was bowed



over a book. She called him, and when he came, "Did you hear those idiot servants?" she asked.

"About your possession?"

"Yes."

"Everyone is saying the same, Bai Saheb."

"Are they all mad?"

He smiled. "Only credulous."

"Do you remember saying to me when I told you there wouldn't be any more scenes like that again—'That's for you to say'. What did you mean by that?"

"Why, you had told me, Bai Saheb, that you were now recovered—so—I meant that if you were quite well, of course——"

"No, you didn't mean anything of the sort. Please tell me really what you meant."

"I shouldn't dare."

"Please . . ."

"Well," he smiled, "it seems a pity to disappoint them all . . ."

"What d'you mean?"

"Even if you didn't act that first incident, why shouldn't you act a second?"

She gasped, thought for a moment of ordering him from the house, and then, her curiosity overcoming her, she said, "But what would be the good of that?"

"You'd be able to stay on in this house, for one thing."

"Oh, so you know about my being a pauper, do you?"



He nodded. "The *Karbhari* told us *brahma-charis* that we'd have to look for another house to support us, and that won't be easy nowadays when the rich have little to spare for Brahman students."

She almost laughed at his impudence. "So you want me to be able to stay on here, so that you needn't move?"

"Bai Saheb, I also want you to be saved any trouble and inconvenience. These fools will believe anything. Just stage some sort of show for them once a week and all the pious will begin making offerings to you."

She made a sudden gesture. "Will you leave me now?"

When he was gone she thought over his suggestion. I suppose I ought to have driven him from this house for his presumption. And yet I like him. He's frank. And, oh, why not carry out that idea? If it fails I shan't be worse off than I am now. The creditors will attach this house and I shall have nothing to live on; but if it succeeds . . . For a moment she thought of all her plans for culture and enlightenment. What had happened to them now? She was to live on deceit, exploiting superstition and credulity. Oh well, what does it matter anyway? One must live.

She went over to the window. There was a small crowd outside the palace. They were questioning the red uniformed peons at the door.



She knew they were asking them if this strange story of possession were true.

“ Oh, the fools ! ” she cried. “ They want it to be true. They want to be fooled and I want to live.” And with a gasp of hysterical despair, “ If they want to be fooled let them be. I’ll do it. Oh, I’ll fool them.”

She called Kalasha again and asked him if he would help her to do this. He eagerly agreed. So she became a seeress and Kalasha became her counsellor and presently her lover. That was inevitable, perhaps. He was handsome and masterful and in his coarse masculinity a pleasant contrast to her husband. She didn’t love him at all, as she admitted to herself in moments of reflection, but he could satisfy her, and it was nice to have someone so self-assured to rely on. If sometimes she regretted ever having yielded to him she soon realised that she could not escape from him now. He could ruin her by exposing the deception of her “ possession ”. And she had no illusions about his feeling for her. If she were penniless he would leave her. She accepted this without bitterness or cynicism. She shrugged her shoulders with a wry smile and said, “ I never expected more from him. I happen to need him, I gave myself to him, and now I’ve got him in my skin.”

And then that Holi evening. Kalasha had gone out to amuse himself, and sitting alone in her room she had happened to take down one



of her books, some sentimental novel, and all at once her old dreams of romance and adventurous love came over her like a wave. For a moment she almost hated Kalasha. "My husband and Kalasha. Between them they've robbed me of all my hopes and dreams." Between the pages of the book she came upon a slip of paper on which she had once scribbled a poem. A childish effusion, but the words came back to her with a sudden poignance. She had imagined a girl sitting by a forest pool plucking the blood-red lotuses that grew along the bank, when a young prince comes riding by, separated from his companions in the excitement of a hunt. She read the verses over and over again. And then as though in ironic comment upon her mood a crowd of Holi revellers passed in the street below singing a song in praise of the Love-God. So she had gone out and met Suka. And now he was coming as her motor-driver. She closed her eyes and shivered with ecstasy. "But what'll Kalasha think and do? He'll soon know I've engaged a new driver and the servants will whisper. You can't keep anything secret from them. Then he'll find out. Oh, but I can't help it. I can't cope with life. Things must arrange themselves."

Suka put on his uniform that had lain so long unused. Bhimi had polished the buttons till they shone. He stood with head up while she fastened the hooks at the neck.



“ There ! ” she said, drawing her hands down his chest, smoothing out the wrinkles in the stiff khaki-cloth. “ Oh, wait a minute, one shoulder-strap’s undone.” She stood on tiptoe, fastened the shoulder-strap and gave him a quick kiss. He caught her in his arms.

“ Isn’t it lovely that I’ve got a job again ? ”

She nodded happily. She accompanied him down to the front door of the *chawl*. There was a group of *chawl*-tenants clustered round the door.

“ Have you heard ? . . . ”

“ No, what’s the trouble ? ” Suka asked.

“ There was a bad riot this morning. Police charges . . . untouchables killed. . . . A temple broken into and defiled.” Fruitily they recited the news.

“ Oh, Suka, d’you think the streets are safe ? ”

“ Why, of course.” He looked down at Bhimi, squaring his shoulders swaggeringly. “ They won’t touch me, and if they do they’ll get something to sober them. Besides, after all I’m a Maratha. This is a Brahman–untouchable affair.”

She clung to his sleeve. “ Do be careful, won’t you ? ”

“ I’ll be careful all right. Don’t you worry about me.”

He went off down the street, looked back to wave once or twice and then was hidden from sight behind a bullock-cart with high painted hood. The streets were almost empty and



unnaturally quiet, the Temples' gates shut and bolted.

Bhimi went back to her room. Suka had told her that he wouldn't be back before supper. I must get a really nice supper ready for him. Some puri-cakes with spinach sauce and spiced tomatoes in shrikan-cream. She counted out her money. "It's lucky he got a job now. We're almost at the end of our resources. I hope he remembers to ask for an advance instalment of his pay."

The seeress was expected to be constant in her attendance at the Temple even when most people shut themselves in their houses and waited for the rioting to finish. Ahalya was not conscious of any particular daring when she ordered her car (it was more like a lorry, with silk-curtained windows) to take her to the Temple that evening as usual. They passed a procession of untouchables and Ahalya said to herself, "What fools! What does it matter whether they can enter the Temples or not? What does anything really matter? Life is so short and so seldom tolerable." And then seeing Suka's back, the shoulder-blades shadowed through his tunic and the smooth line of his neck under his cap, she added, "And then at intervals how more than tolerable, how exquisitely lovely."

The procession parted to let her car through. There were murmurs and cries of "A Brahman bitch", but others said, "It's the seeress, the



holy woman," and they let her pass without insult, many even salaaming.

But on their return they ran into a larger crowd. Some of them had bandages round their heads or shoulders where the police lathis had fallen, many were drunk, all were in an ugly mood. They lined out across the street, holding hands and shouting at Suka to stop. A flung stone crashed through a window. Suka set his teeth and accelerated. There were wild cries, a stone grazed his cheek, he saw the right mudguard catch a man's side and tear it open, a white-clad figure crumpled up in front of the radiator, a dull bump over some prostrate body, and then the road was open and the yelling crowd behind them. In a few minutes they were at Ahalya's palace.

She got down, and said to him (he was holding the door open for her) : " You did very well then. I thought for a moment we wouldn't be able to get through."

" I wouldn't have been able to ordinarily."

" You can't afford to run people down like that. But to-night the police are busy and no one will be surprised at a few extra casualties—they'll be put down to the rioting and the police won't bother to take any complaints from untouchables who've just been giving them so much trouble."

She wanted to prolong the conversation. " I hope that stone didn't get you ? "



"Lord, no. Just went over my shoulder. Made rather a nasty dent here, though. And that window's smashed."

"That doesn't matter. I was afraid you were hurt."

"No. I'm fine, thanks."

She was looking up at him in the way he remembered. But first the advance he promised Bhimi.

"I wonder . . . Would it be too much trouble . . . I'm sorry to ask, but the fact is if you could let me have an advance on my pay, only five rupees or so?"

She gave a quick glance round. There were no servants at the door—something to thank the riots for anyway.

"Why, of course. Come upstairs, will you?"

And, grateful to him for the excuse, she led him to her room. The light of the sunset came through the open window. She smiled at him as she had smiled in the shadow of the bamboo grove. . . .

He took off his coat and shirt. She gazed a moment in ecstatic appreciation of his beauty, the broad shoulders and red-brown chest, the narrow waist and tapering flanks. You must imagine a Minoan bull-fighter poised for his leap in the dancing-ground that Daedalus built in Knossos for golden-haired Ariadne.

They neither heard the door open, so wrapped were they in each other. And Kalasha drove a long knife deep into Suka's back.



The other women of the *chawl* helped Bhimi to smear fresh cow-dung on the floor and scatter basil-leaves and spread a soft brown carpet over the aromatic leaves. They laid Suka's body gently on that carpet and bathed it with warm water and perfumed oil and wound a white cloth about the loins. And the rest of the ritual? "I have no money," Bhimi moaned, but the other women comforted her and each subscribed something so that the ceremony should be completed and with their money a leaf of gold and a small emerald were brought and placed under Suka's tongue. Under his tongue the two symbols of rebirth shone moistly, then the mouth was closed. And all the time a priest, squatting by the door, moaned the sacred verses of the *Vedas*.

Now the corpse was ready for its journey. Four young men grouped themselves round the narrow bier (rushes stretched between bamboo poles). They sprinkled holy water over the face and wrapped the body in a sheet and cast cham-pak-flowers over it. One lad had a brass firepot hanging on a red string from his wrist. Another carried a winnowing-fan with parched pulse and slices of coconut thereon. These were to be sprinkled in their path to please the demons.

In a low voice they began the funeral cry. "Ram ! Ram ! Jai ! Ram !" Bowing, the young men lifted the bier and carried it feet foremost from the room. With wide tearless



eyes Bhimi watched them go. She could not accompany the body to the burning ghat for no woman may. Their bare feet shuffled on the stairs, and fainter came the cry to Ram. Now she could hear them no longer. The women closed the shutters and left her, the widow, wrapped in a coarse white sheet, the widow in her loneliness.

She did not move at their departure. She was very calm and quiet, for she knew what she still had to do. She wanted to sit on there and imagine the procession going slowly down to the river, the bareheaded barefooted youths and the pitiful little shrunken form swaying in its wicker bier. Ah, so shrunken his face, the fallen cheeks. And he was so lovely, he smiled and his face puckered up and his white teeth shone. I've got a job now, Bhimi, and everything will be all right. I may be a bit late perhaps ; but I'll be back by supper. And now that we've no fear of immediate poverty we can afford a decent supper. In the bazaar they'll have fresh papaias ; Suka always loves papaias ; and perhaps a water-melon. Must hurry or I'll be too late. How terrible if I didn't manage to have a nice supper waiting for him. Oh, but he is dead. . . . Yes, the procession will be coming near the river now. The wide sweep of sand and white egrets floating over the river. They pass the little monument to Queen Sitabai who committed *Sati* on her husband's death ; a square stone with two little



feet upon it—that's the memorial of a dutiful wife. But people say she had to be drugged. And when the fire rose round her she awoke and screamed and struggled to escape from the bier, but the guards grouped round the pyre held their spears in rest and drove her back upon the flame. So why does she deserve so great an honour? A Queen, I suppose. Many humble women cannot bear to live any longer when their man is dead, but they have no monument.

They'll be building the funeral pyre by now, and then the body will be set upon it, the feet towards the south, and the pyre lit from the firepot. Only smoke at first, the twigs turning black and drooping. One of the corpse-bearers fans with his shawl the flames till they climb crackling round the body ; and a great cloud of steely smoke rises bellying like a sail.

“ Now ! ” said Bhimi, and she rose and went to the cupboard. From a copper bowl she took *kusa* grass and sesamum and turned towards the east and north, repeating the magic word “ Om ! ” She prostrated herself before the God Vishnu and cried that to rejoin her man in heaven and to expiate her sins she would share his funeral pyre. She prayed in turn to the Eight Directions, to the Sun, the Moon, Air, Ether, Earth and Water, to her own soul, to Day and Night and Twilight, to the prince of the shadow Kingdom and to Yama, God of Death.

She took off her necklace and ear-rings, kissed



them and threw them from her to show she renounced the world. Then she lighted two candles and held one in each hand. Her eyes were dim. There was an increasing shadow over everything. The shadow, perhaps, of the approach of Yama. People said he never came more gently than to bear away the souls of dutiful women, of those who gave their lives in the sacrifice of *Sati*. In that narrow room were no cheering crowds or priests scattering benediction, but in her loneliness she felt the sacrifice an easy thing. She set the candles against her sari. The dry thin cloth caught quickly and she smiled to see the flames rise round her like the petals of a yellow lotus, curving inwards and enfolding her.



